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No. 5709

THE CELTIC ELEMENTS IN SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

THESIS

Presented to the Graduate Council of the
North Texas State University in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

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August, 1980

Alewine, Elizabeth, The Celtic Elements in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight. Master of Arts (English), August, 1980, 99 pp., bibliography, 25 titles.

The medieval English poem Sir Gawain and the Green Knight evidences much of its Celtic heritage in the plot and subplot, as well as in the characters themselves. The Ulster Cycle, an ancient Irish story group, and the Mabinogion, a medieval collection of traditional Welsh tales, both contain parallels to the English romance. In addition to these numerous analogues, other Celtic features appear in the poem. Knowingly or not, the Gawain-poet used the conventions of the Irish and Welsh traditions in the Other World journey, the battle-belt/lace, the pentangle/sun symbol, and the color green. A study of these elements as Celtic features of the poem ensures a proper reading of Sir Gawain and the Green Knight.

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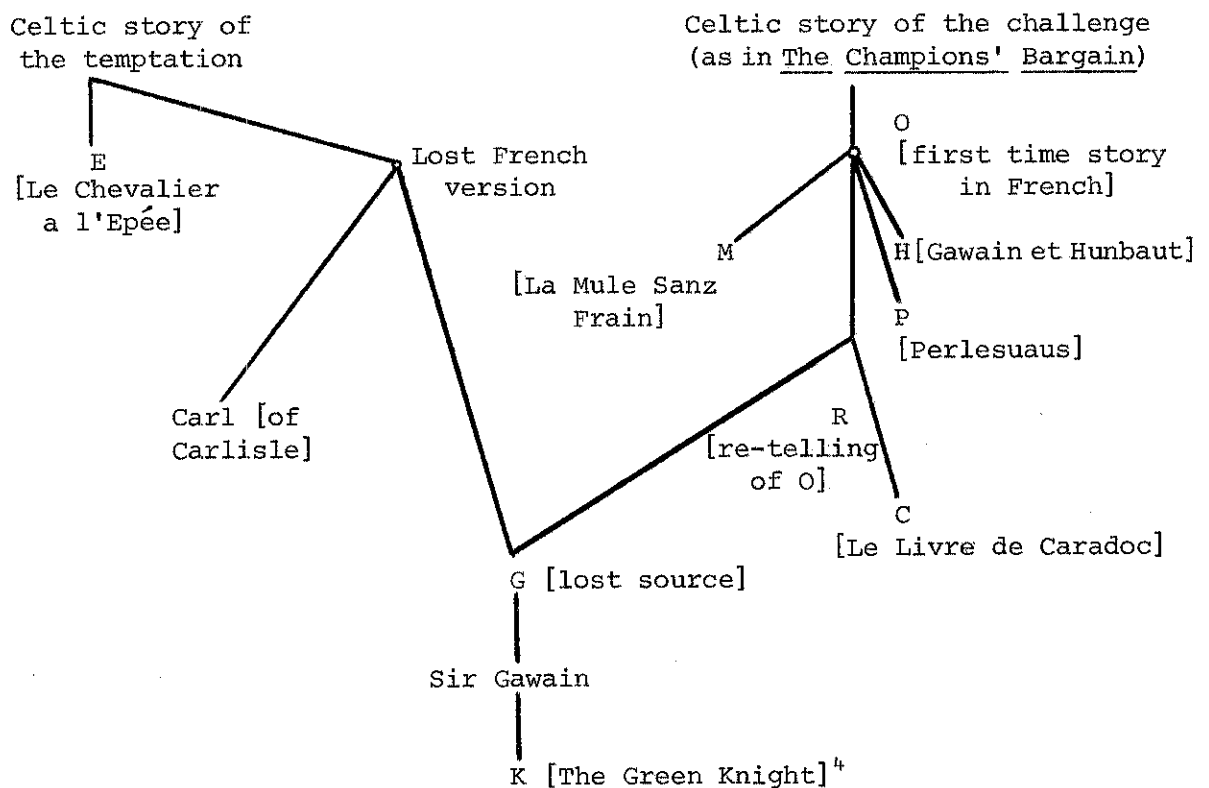
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Charles Moorman believes "the myths involved in [Sir Gawain and the Green Knight] do to a large extent determine its ultimate meaning," and he further suggests that "the attempts to isolate and trace Celtic elements [have] touched upon the meaning of those same myths in [the poem]." ¹ Despite the belief of many that source studies are not as valuable as criticism, they are important because they enable the scholar and the critic to come to a better understanding of the work.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (hereafter referred to as GGK) is a complex and sophisticated poem, a work not only outstanding for its own time, but for all time. The GGK poet's expert use of alliterative verse and the bob-and-wheel is proof of that unknown man's artistry; however, while such a complexly structured work required a poet of no small talent, the poem merits attention on another level: it is a good story. Although by the middle of the fourteenth century romances had largely degenerated into loosely organized tales whose only unifying device was the protagonist, GGK has little in common with these;

lines 32-35. Roger S. Loomis in Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance and George L. Kittredge in Gawain and the Green Knight advance the theory that the poet based his poem on a now lost French tale in which "The Champions' Bargain" and the Temptation stories were first joined.³ In their edition of GGK, Tolkien and Gordon provide in the introductory notes this table illustrating the theory of the French original:



Loomis goes a step further than Kittredge by tracing a probable route by which Celtic tales traveled from Wales to France and then back to England. Unlike Kittredge, Loomis believes that not only GGK, but all of the Arthurian

romances have their roots in Irish and Welsh myth. Loomis holds that a Breton bard took the Temptation and "The Champions' Bargain" from myths he knew, created the plot of GGK, and told his tale to French audiences. It was this story, Loomis says, that was eventually written down in French. It is thought that a manuscript traveled from France to England where a copy found its way to the GGK poet.⁵ However, only adherents to this theory allude to the Breton/French source; they base their belief on the poet's admission that he has borrowed his material from another source where it was "stad and stoken / In stori stif and stronge, / With lel letteres loken, / In londe so hatȝ ben longe" (ll. 32-35). Although the theory of a French original sounds plausible enough, it is unverifiable. In fact, those same introductory lines from GGK and a closer look at the inherent Celtic elements of the poem may be used to argue strongly that no single French source for the poem existed.

Regardless of the French intermediary sources, the ultimate source for the two stories in GGK seems clearly to be Celtic myth. Charles Moorman notes that "all of the stories of King Arthur [are] lost in the mists of the Celtic oral tradition" and that GGK "is a courtly poem whose narrative and descriptive elements reach far back into Celtic myth."⁶ The two plots, the Temptation and "The

Champions' Bargain," do come from the Ulster Cycle or the Red Branch, the early Irish heroic sagas. The Ulster group is preserved in several medieval Irish manuscripts, the best known being the Lebor na hUidre, the Book of the Dun Cow, which was "compiled in the monastery of Clonmacnoise in the twelfth century."⁷ Two other Irish manuscripts also contain parts of the Red Branch, the fourteenth-century Yellow Book of Lecan and the twelfth-century Book of Leinster.⁸ The tales in these manuscripts are primarily about the life of the hero Cuchulainn and his exploits, the principal one being the Táin Bó Cuailnge or the Cattle Raid of Cuailnge. Celticists generally agree that the Táin, along with the rest of the Ulster Cycle tales, "are far more ancient than [the] manuscripts."⁹ The earliest form of the Táin has been dated by its language at least to the eighth century, and evidence suggests that some passages "may be two centuries older." In any case, the tales surely "must have had a long oral existence before [they] received a literary shape, and a few traces of Christian colour, at the hands of monastic scribes."¹⁰ The characters who appear in the tales are most likely the gods and goddesses of the ancient Celts, and the period of composition is probably around the time of Christ.¹¹

Although the Irish tales are the earliest sources for the Temptation and "The Champions' Bargain," the Welsh Mabinogion also provides material for source study. Like the Irish cycle, the Welsh tales survive "in more or less complete versions in the White Book of Rhydderch (Llyh Gwyn Rhydderch, A.D. 1300-25) and the Red Book of Hergest (1375-1425).¹² Celtic scholars consider the tales much older than the manuscripts in which they appear, and, like the Irish tradition, they probably were transmitted orally long before they were committed in writing.¹³ The Mabinogion itself consists of four parts, called "Branches": Pwyll, Lord of Dyved; Branwen, Daughter of Llyr; Manawydan, Son of Llyr; and Math, Son of Mathonwy. Several other tales not part of the Mabinogion proper are in the manuscripts as well, one of which, Culhwch and Olwen, is important as an analogue to GKG, as well as being the first tale concerning a Welsh chieftain named Arthur.

Gawain, the Green Knight, Bercilak's lady, and even Arthur and Guinevere are based on characters in the Celtic legends who can be traced from the earliest Irish myths concerning Cuchulainn and Curoi mac Daire through the Welsh stories about Pwyll and Culhwch down to GKG. Not only are the characters the same in these stories, but the plots are similar also. Both the Temptation and "The Champion's Bargain" are in the Cuchulainn and Pwyll legends.

The similarities among these three stories are not coincidence; the ancient religious myths of the Celts are preserved in the evolution from Cuchulainn to Gawain. The Cuchulainn legends are probably very close to those known by the ancient Celts. The Welsh version is a more recent development in which, although original details were confused, the most important traditions were retained. Even though GGK is the most recent of the three versions, it still retains much of the ancient Celtic religious myth.

Studying the sources and analogues of literary works is not always considered the most scholarly approach to literary criticism. Larry D. Benson has said that "the idea that aesthetic pleasure can arise from knowing the antecedents of a work is so foreign to modern criticism" that "the 'source study' is consequently in . . . ill repute."¹⁴ Benson reminds scholars that "traditional literatures . . . are distinguished most sharply from modern by their preference for the repetition of old tales rather than 'originality.'"¹⁵ The writers of romances, along with those of other forms of "traditional literatures," would never have considered fabricating a new tale, for art was not based on how novel the story was, but on how well it was told. Since the action of the poem was probably familiar to the GGK poet's audience, it stands to reason that in order to appreciate the poem

at least as fully as medieval audiences did, a modern reader should be as familiar with the sources as they. Even when a reader is ignorant of its antedecedents, GGK is a good story, well told; armed with a knowledge of its sources and elements, particularly the Celtic elements, one can more fully understand and appreciate the work.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles Moorman, The Pearl-Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 105.

²J. R. R. Tolkien and E. V. Gordon, eds., Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930), p. 2. All subsequent quotations from the poem will be taken from this text and cited by line numbers only.

³Roger S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 24-35; George L. Kittredge, A Study of Gawain and the Green Knight (London: Oxford University Press, 1916), p. 137.

⁴Tolkien and Gordon, p. xv.

⁵Loomis, pp. 24-29.

⁶Moorman, p. 96.

⁷Thomas Kinsella, trans, The Táin (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. ix.

⁸Kinsella, p. ix.

⁹Kinsella, p. ix.

¹⁰Kinsella, p. ix.

¹¹Kinsella, p. ix.

¹²Patrick K. Ford, The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales (Los Angeles: The University of California Press, 1977), p. 2.

¹³Ford, p. 2.

¹⁴Larry D. Benson, Art and Tradition in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1965), pp. 4-5.

¹⁵Benson, p. 5.

CHAPTER II

THE ULSTER CYCLE AND SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT

An abundance of parallels exists between GGK and the Irish tales about Cuchulainn mac Sualdam, which come from the Ulster Cycle. The most commonly noted parallel is "The Champions' Bargain," but there are many others. The characters in GGK and the Cuchulainn stories are also similar; it has been suggested, and rightly so, that the characters in the Red Branch are the bases for the characters in Arthurian romance.¹ Surely the parallels are easy to see: King Conchobar of Ulster, one of the five Irish states, has a magnificent court toward which all of the best warriors of Erin gravitate; the foremost among them is Cuchulainn mac Sualdam, Conchobar's nephew. After many years, Conchobar's court falls into utter ruin because of a curse laid upon it by the druid Cathbad. The earliest likenesses of Gawain, Arthur, and Merlin are evident in Cuchulainn, Conchobar, and Cathbad.

There is a wealth of plots and characters in the old Irish tradition, and often what surfaces in Arthurian romance are parts of several stories fused into one "new" tale. The same thing is true of the characters. For instance, the Arthurian character Merlin the magician has

the characteristics of Cathbad the druid, who is a seer, and also of Curoi mac Daire, the magician, shapeshifter, and judgment giver.

Differences between the Irish myths concerning Cuchulainn and the most graceful Arthurian romance, GGK, are easily attributed to separation in time and space of the authors and the audiences. However, the similarities are interesting to scholars of the Arthurian romance.

At the New Year's feast in GGK a most unusual event takes place: a huge, beautiful green man arrives at Arthur's court desiring a game. He offers to let one of Arthur's knights give him a stroke with the ax he has brought along. However, in a year the knight must search out the green man and suffer a return blow. Arthur's men are hesitant to take up the visitor's challenge, and in order to preserve the honor of his court, Arthur is forced to take the green man's ax. Gawain, Arthur's nephew, is the only one of Arthur's knights unwilling to let Arthur accept the challenge:

Gawan, þat sate bi þe quene,
To þe kyng he can enclyne,
"I beseche now with saþe sene
Þis melly mot be myne."
"Wolde þe, worþilych lorde," quop Wawan to þe kyng,
"Bid me boþe fro þis benche, and stonde by yow þere,
Þat I wythoute vylanye myȝt voyde þis table,
And þat my legge lady lyked not ille,
I wolde com to your counseyl bfore your cort ryche."
(11. 339-47)

[Gawain, that sat by the queen,
 To the king he inclined,
 "I beseech you with clear words
 That this melée be mine."
 "If you would, worthy lord," quoted Gawain to the king,
 "Bid me go from this bench and stand by you there,
 That I without villainy might quit this table,
 And that my liege lady liked not ill,
 I would come to your counsel, before your rich court."]

Arthur lets Gawain accept the challenge in his place.

After the Green Knight receives the blow, he picks up his head, mounts his horse, reminds Gawain of their meeting the next year, and departs.

When the time comes, Gawain sets out to look for the Green Chapel. He takes refuge at Bercilak's castle where, unknown to him, he is tested by Bercilak's wife. On the appointed day, Gawain appears at the Chapel and receives three strokes from the Green Knight, two of which are harmless; the third blow draws blood, but is not mortal. The Green Knight proclaims the young man to be a worthy knight, and Gawain is then free to return to Arthur's court.

"The Champions' Bargain," which is one of the tales of the Táin Bó Cuailnge, is in many ways similar to the beheading episode in GGK. As in the English work, a feast has been prepared by Bricriu the Poison Tongue, who hopes to set the Ulstermen fighting among themselves. Bricriu succeeds in creating dissension among Cuchulainn, Laegaire, and Conall as to which of the three is the champion of Ulster and therefore deserving of the champion's portion

of the feast. Conchobar sends the warriors to Medb and Ailill, queen and king of Connaught, so that the burden of decision rests there instead of with him. Medb and Ailill choose Cuchulainn, but Laegaire and Conall refuse to abide by their decision. The warriors are then sent to Curoi mac Daire, the magician, where Blanaid, Curoi's wife, points out that Cuchulainn, after three battle tests, is the best of the three warriors. Laegaire and Conall still refuse to admit defeat.

When they return to Conchobar's court, there appears an ugly grey-cloaked giant who has a branch over his head and carries a gigantic ax. Any man at court, the giant says, except Conchobar and Fergus mac Rogh (who are both kings and thereby excused from this sort of battle play), may cut off his head with his ax, and on the next day the giant will return the blow. Cuchulainn is the only one who both strikes off the giant's head and returns to take his blow. The giant, who tells the court his name is Uath (Terror), raises the ax above Cuchulainn's head and brings it crashing down to the ground beside the warrior. When the men of Ulster look back at Uath, they see not him but the magician Curoi mac Daire, who then proclaims Cuchulainn the finest warrior in Ulster.

The Green Knight is much like the giant churl who enters Conchobar's hall. Both are huge and peculiarly

dressed, although one is extraordinarily handsome and the other is extremely ugly. Uath has with him a great branch of a tree, whereas the Green Knight carries a holly branch. The Green Knight, like Uath, proposes a beheading game, with the only difference between the two being the interval between the champion's blow and the return blow. Both men turn out to be disguised by magic, Curoi by his own, Bercilak by that of Morgain le Fay.

The various parts of the temptation episode in GGK--those sections in which Bercilak's wife attempts to seduce Gawain on three successive mornings--are not as easily traced as "The Champions' Bargain." Certain elements occur independently in three of the Irish tales: "The Champions' Bargain" (or "The Championship of Ulster"), "The Tragic Death of Curoi," and "The Wooing of Emer."

When Cuchulainn, Conall, and Laegaire arrive at Curoi's castle in "The Champion's Bargain," Curoi is absent. He has not gone by accident since he knew through his magic that the three warriors would come and what they would want to know. Leaving instructions with Blanaid as to what the warriors should be told to do, Curoi goes away specifically so that the men can be tested. Conall and Laegaire fail their single tests, but Cuchulainn passes the three tests he is given. He fights twenty-seven shadowy figures, a great sea worm, and a large grey giant,

vanquishing all of them. Cuchulainn's three tests are echoed in the three tests which Bercilak and his lady give Gawain.

Alice Buchanan has suggested that part of "The Champions' Bargain" was deleted by a scribe. Possibly there had earlier been a passage between Blanað and Cuchulainn which was not included in the final manuscript.² This idea is not entirely without merit, for although Cuchulainn is happily married to Emer, he often sleeps with other women; once he has a relationship with a fairy but has to give it up when Emer and the fairy's husband discover them together. Because of his incredible beauty, Cuchulainn is usually approached by the women to whom he succumbs. In "The Tragic Death of Cu Roi," Cuchulainn returns to Cu Roi's castle to rescue Blanað, who has apparently requested Cuchulainn's aid. With Blanað's help, Cuchulainn kills Cu Roi, takes the lady, and appropriates Cu Roi's cauldron and cattle. It is entirely possible that in the deleted passage of "The Champions' Bargain" Blanað requested that Cuchulainn free her from Cu Roi, promising among other things her sexual favors in return. Such promises are frequent in the Irish tales; Queen Medb often threw in the offer of her favors as an added inducement whenever she desired some feat accomplished by a warrior.

In "The Champions' Bargain" there is an echo of Blanað's treatment of the Ulstermen; just as Bercilak's wife does, Blanað acts in collusion with Curoi. She knows, as does Curoi, why the warriors have come to the castle, and she is aware that they must be tested. When Cuchulainn leaps over the castle wall after battling the grey giant, Blanað knows he has passed the tests, just as Bercilak's wife knows Gawain has passed his tests when he refuses for the third time to do more than offer a courteous kiss.

In the tale "The Wooing of Emer," Cuchulainn exhibits the same prowess which Gawain possesses in his courtly banter with Bercilak's lady. The Ulstermen encourage Cuchulainn to marry so that they may protect their daughters' chastity and their wives' fidelity. In all of Erin only one woman possesses the six womanly gifts that Cuchulainn says are necessary in the woman he marries. That woman is Emer, daughter of Forgall the Wily. Cuchulainn journeys to Forgall's land where he finds Emer embroidering in a field with other young noblewomen. Partly to conceal their meaning and partly to exhibit their talents, Cuchulainn and Emer exchange courtly, stilted riddles not unlike the verbal fencing which passes between Gawain and Bercilak's lady.

The Temptation episode parallels, then, between GGK and the Irish analogues are clearly evident. In both cases there is an absent host, and the hero is left in the hands of the host's wife. Each man is subjected to tests, and, interestingly enough, only Cuchulainn of the Irish warriors must face three tests in "The Champions' Bargain." Indeed, the number three is often important in Cuchulainn's battles or tests. Also, the courtly banter between Gawain and Bercilak's lady is curiously similar to the riddles of Emer and Cuchulainn. There is even the possibility that in some lost episode Blanað tempted Cuchulainn to wrong her husband. The parallels between the Irish tales and the English poem are many indeed.

Another similarity between GGK and the Táin Bó Cuailnge is the disguised guest, although this guest is not horrible in the sense that Uath or the Green Knight is horrible, for the latter two are frightening creatures of the supernatural. A disguised guest also appears in "The Wooing of Emer." Emer's father Forgall discovers that his daughter and Cuchulainn have made secret plans to marry. He decides to thwart the lovers, either because he had an older, imperfect daughter to marry off first or because Cuchulainn did not approach him about the girl. Forgall disguises himself as a Gaul and travels to Emain Macha, the capital of Ulster, with gifts for Conchobar. When the

heroes of Ulster are presented to him, he praises Cuchulainn most of all, but suggests that he study war feats with the woman-warrior Scathach to improve himself. Forgall's hope is that Cuchulainn will meet his death on the perilous journey to Scathach.

Forgall's stay at Emain Macha is very much like the disguised Bercilak's visit to Arthur's court. Forgall pricks Cuchulainn's pride, causing him to leave Emain Macha on a dangerous journey so uncertain that his safe return is a matter of speculation. The trip is a difficult one, just as Gawain's journey is filled with hardship and warfare.

On his winter journey in search of the Green Chapel, Gawain endures the bitter cold of winter, the battles with many ferocious beasts, and the loneliness of being a solitary traveller. Cuchulainn also endures winter hardships alone, though not on his journey. His winter trial comes when the men of Ulster are in their pangs (pains like childbirth afflict all Ulstermen during the winter as a punishment for Conchobar's unkindness to a woman in labor). It has been prophesied that in their greatest need, the men of Ulster will be destined to be as helpless as if they were women during childbirth. Cuchulainn, the women, and the children are immune to the pangs. Thus, one winter when Medb and Ailill, along with the other three kingships of Ireland, march against Ulster, only Cuchulainn

can protect Conchobar's lands. Cuchulainn and Gawain suffer much during their winter trials: Gawain on his way to fulfill a promise and Cuchulainn to save his home. This, along with the other parallels, convincingly argues that the most important analogues to GGK and the other Arthurian romances are those found in the Irish tales.

Although similarities of plot between GGK and the tales of the Red Branch are of consequence in a study of the sources and analogues of GGK, the similarities between the characters are also important. Arthur, Gawain, Bercilak, and Morgain le Fay are the central figures in GGK, and they have counterparts in the Red Branch.

As mentioned earlier, Cuchulainn's lord, King Conchobar of Ulster, established a court unlike previous or existent ones in Ireland; it is much like Arthur's Camelot with its brotherhood of the Round Table. To Conchobar's court came the finest fighters in all Erin, the best warriors as well as the wisest men. Like Arthur, Conchobar did not receive kingship by ordinary means, although in Ireland kingship was elective, not hereditary.³ Nor was Conchobar's birth ordinary. His father was Cathbad the druid, who seduced Ness, the daughter of a king, by telling her that a certain hour was apt for begetting a king and then handliy being the only male available to her at that hour. Arthur's birth was brought about by another

druid-like seer, Merlin, who played upon the lust of Uther, Arthur's father. The Ulsterman was assured the throne when his mother Ness married the king of Ulster and for her bride gift asked only that her son, who was then seven years old, be allowed to rule for one year as king, so that his children might be called sons of a king. By the end of the year Ness has made certain that the throne of Ulster would never return to her husband, but always be held by Conchobar, who is referred to as Conchobar mac Ness, that is, Conchobar son of Ness, and never as Conchobar mac Cathbad.

While Conchobar's ascendancy to the throne lacks the drama of Arthur's sword and the stone incident, it does indicate a certain kinship. Both Conchobar and Arthur are royal children, Arthur a king's son and Conchobar a queen's; both take thrones by unusual means when they are boys. In addition to these similarities, there is another which links the two men as different manifestations of the same character. Each supposedly seduced his sister, and as a result a son was born. Arthur unwittingly seduced his half-sister and fathered Mordred, whom he later killed with full knowledge of his identity. Conchobar is strongly suspected of having drunkenly forced his sister Deichtine. When her pregnancy became evident, Conchobar quickly married her to Sualdam, and the child she bore was Cuchulainn.

Unlike Arthur, Conchobar did not kill his son, but Cuchulainn later kills his son by the Amazon queen Aife, knowing that the boy is his.

Gawain is noble and proud; he will not let Arthur suffer the indignity and danger of taking up the Green Knight's challenge, nor will he let it be said that the knights of Arthur's court are afraid to battle the green man. Gawain is also accomplished in manners, both in the courtly banter in which he engages with his host and in the careful language of chaste courtly love which he employs against the temptation of Bercilak's lovely wife. Honor is not a matter to be taken lightly with Gawain; he is eager to keep his word to the Green Knight, even though he expects certain death at his hands, and he is eager to keep his pact with Bercilak, even though he fails somewhat by accepting the lace from Bercilak's lady and not turning it over to his host.

In her attempted seduction of Gawain, Bercilak's wife recounts the many virtues of her intended victim. He is comely, honorable, and courteous. He is, she says, desired by all women:

"For I wene wel, iwysse, Sir Woven þe are,
 Þat alle þe worlde worchipeþ quere-so þe ride;
 Your honour, your hendelayk is hendely praysed
 With lordeþ, with ladyes, with alle þat lyf bere."
 (ll. 1226-29)

["For I know well, indeed, Sir Gawain you are,
 That all the world honors, wherever you ride;
 Your honor, your courtesy is handily praised
 By lords and by ladies, and all that bear life."]

.
 "In god fayth, Sir Gawayn," quoth þe gay lady,
 "Þe prys and þe prowes þat pleseþ al oþer,
 If I hit lakked oþer set at lyt, hit were little daynté;
 Bot hit are ladyes innoþe þat leuer wer nowþe
 Haf þe, hende, in hor holde, as I þe habbe here."
 (ll. 1248-52)

["In good faith, Sir Gawain," said the gay lady,
 "The excellence and the prowess that pleases all others
 If I it belittled or made light of, it would be little
 courtesy,
 But there are ladies enough who would now like
 To have you in their hold, as I have you here."]

Gawain, in addition to all his other attributes, is
 brave: he keeps his appointment with the Green Knight and
 submits to three strokes of the ax. While it is true that
 Gawain flinches at the first blow, he does not retreat.
 Sir Gawain also recognizes and quickly acknowledges his
 fault when the Green Knight tells him that he knows about
 the lace. Gawain is a wise man to see his own folly and
 to accept the responsibility for his failing.

Cuchulainn is described in terms like those used for
 Gawain; he is possessed of only three faults, but of many
 virtues:

When Cuchulainn was growing out of his boyhood
 at Emain Macha, all of the women of Ulster loved
 him for his skill in feats, for the lightness of
 his leaps, for the weight of his wisdom, for the
 sweetness of his speech, for the beauty of his
 face, for the loveliness of his looks, for all his
 gifts. He had the gift of caution in fighting
 . . . , the gift of feats . . . , the gift of
 divining, the gift of right judgment, the gift
 of beauty.⁴

Cuchulainn, like Gawain, is handsome, brave, wise, cour-
 teous of speech, and conscious of honor. It is because

of his great beauty that the Ulstermen wish Cuchulainn quickly married. His exchange of riddles with Emer evidences his excellence in sweet speech. For the honor of Ulster Cuchulainn kills his son by Aife. Because of the boasts the boy has made, Cuchulainn as the champion of Ulster has no choice but to kill him. The same thing is true when Cuchulainn defends the marches of Ulster against the four other kingships of Ireland; in single combat the champion has to fight his foster-brother, with whom he learned the art of warfare under the tutelage of Scathach. Because of his sense of honor and his pride, Cuchulainn must kill his friend. Likewise, as the bravest of the Irish champions, he is the only one willing to submit to Uath's blow. This and his single-handed protection of Ulster indicate that Cuchulainn, like Gawain, is the best and bravest of his court.

As Roger S. Loomis, L. Winifred Faraday, and Alice Buchanan suggest, Cuchulainn is the personification of the ancient Celtic sun god.⁵ The Celts were sun worshippers, and the Irish revered the sun as a deity long after they had become Christianized.⁶ All of the descriptions of Cuchulainn indicate that he is the personification of the Irish solar god. Cuchulainn's hair is tri-colored: gold on the crown, shading into red as it grows away from his scalp, and brown toward the very end, so that his head looks like the setting sun. Irish men, as well as women,

wore their hair quite long and in three braids with one or more of the plaits wrapped around their heads. Cuchulainn wears his hair in this same way. Because of his awesome appearance in battle, Cuchulainn is often spoken of as the "warped" one. When the battle rage or warp comes upon him, he turns himself completely around in his skin so that his knees are in the rear of his body. In this rage he becomes a great deal like the Germanic berserker warriors who lose all control once they enter the fray. Cuchulainn's battle warp raises his body temperature so that at one point the heat melts the snow within a thirty-foot radius of him. Another time, while still in his boy deeds, Cuchulainn returns in his rage to Ulster. Fearing for their lives, the Ulstermen have all of their women appear naked before the warrior; it is a geasa (personal taboo) that he not gaze upon women's breasts. When he stops and averts his face, the people of Ulster are able to take hold of him and cool him with three vats of cold water. His body heat is so great that he brings the first two vats to the boil. The third vat heats only to normal body temperature.

Since Gawain and Cuchulainn are counterparts, it seems probable that there should be some evidence that Gawain has solar attributes as well. In Arthurian romance in general, and in GGK in particular, he does. In Malory's Morte D'Arthur Gawain and Sir Ewain go adventuring. Before they have gone very far, they discover Sir Marhaus, who

proposes that they joust. Ewain, saying he is the weaker of the two, offers to joust first. After Marhaus bests Ewain, Gawain prepares to avenge the insult to his cousin. The joust between Gawain and Marhaus begins around nine in the morning, and Malory reports that, as the morning advanced, Gawain

waxed ever stronger and stronger, for then it came to the houre of noone, and thrice his might was increased. . . . And when it was past noon and drew toward evensong time, sir Gawaines strength waxed passing faint, that unneth he might not endure any longer.⁹

In the poem there is also evidence of Gawain's solar-ity; he always starts his journeys early in the morning. When he arrives at Bercilak's castle, it is certainly not coincidence that makes Gawain press his host for directions to the Green Chapel so that he may arrive there early in the day. He knows that his bodily strength, as well as his moral strength and courage, is greater while the sun ascends:

"For soþe, sir," quop þe segge, "þe sayn bot þe
trawþe,
A heþe ernde and a hasty me hade fro þo woneþ,
For I am sumned myselfe to sech to a place,
I ne wot in worlde whederwarde to wende hit to fynde.
I nolde bot if I hit negh myþt on Nw þeres morne
For alle þe londe inwyth Logres, so me oure lorde
help!"
(ll. 1050-55)

["In truth, sir," said the man, "you say but the
truth,
A high errand and an urgent one has me from the
dwelling,
For I myself am summoned to seek a place,

I don't know whither in the world to to go find it.
 But I would not miss reaching it on New Year's morn
 For all the land in England, so help me our Lord!"]

The Green Knight, however, says nothing about a morning confrontation when he explains the rules of the game; he only stipulates that it take place at the Green Chapel on a year and a day from his visit. It is, however, early when the green man enters Arthur's hall, and the food is just being served to the lords and ladies. The poet relates that before the feasting much "mirþe þay maden" (l. 71) [mirth they made], and that the New Year was still quite young.

Gawain is probably able to accept the Green Knight's challenge with less apprehension than he might have because it is early in the day, the time most suited for him to do battle. The green man is much larger than any of Arthur's men, and his ax, the poet says, is much larger than any normal ax. In the Green Knight's game, wielding the ax might prove difficult for ordinary men. Because the sun is waxing, Gawain is able to direct a deft blow to the intruder's neck, severing the head cleanly. Just before the contest when the visitor asked Gawain to repeat the terms of the game to him, Arthur's knight says:

"In god fayth," quop þe goode knyȝt, "Gawan I hatte,
 Ðat bede þe þis buffet, quat-so bifalleȝ after,
 And at þis tyme twelmonyth take at þe an oper
 Wyth what weppen so þou wylt, and wyth no wyȝ elleȝ
 on lyue."

(ll. 381-84)

a fact which strengthens his connection with the supernatural beyond his simply being an object used for Morgain's ends.

Since Curoi is possessed of many storm attributes, Loomis has noted he is probably the personification of the Celtic storm god. "Primitive peoples," Loomis says, "often conceived the thunder weapon as an ax."¹¹ In the three tests which Curoi provides for Cuchulainn at his dún (castle), there is no ax, but when he appears as Uath at Conchobar's court, Curoi bears an ax, just as Bercilak does when he comes disguised as the Green Knight to Arthur's court.

Although the three tests are of entirely different natures, both Curoi and Bercilak provide trials for Cuchulainn and Gawain. When Curoi sends supernatural beings to battle Cuchulainn, the Ulsterman is always equal to the task. Bercilak, on the other hand, provides tests of a more subtle, devious nature. Gawain is able to hold his own, protecting his honor as well as that of his host by deftly parrying the lady's advances, although he fails by accepting and concealing the green lace.

When Uath (Curoi) appears at Conchobar's court, he looks like an ugly giant dressed as a herdsman, a bachlach (the Irish word for herdsman), which Uath is often called in the manuscript.¹² Since bachlach is pronounced with

three syllables, Loomis maintains that bachlach is the ultimate source for the name Bercilak.¹³

Much is made of the Green Knight's color in GGK. He is an arresting figure, an extraordinarily large man dressed all in green with green skin and hair, as well as having a green mount. He has red eyes, but outside of that, he is an incredible green apparition. The court is completely aghast at his sudden, ominous appearance. In some of the tales in which Curoi plays a part, much is made of his appearance and his grey clothing.¹⁴ He is a huge, ugly bachlach in "The Champions' Bargain," yellow-eyed and grey-cloaked. It is easy to perceive the similarities in the importance of color in these instances, but it seems odd that one color is green while the other is grey. This problem is, however, one of the most easily cleared up: in Irish there are many words for grey, one of which was often used in connection with Curoi. This word--glas--could mean green as well as grey.¹⁵ Thus, at some time when the story of the grey mantled man was passing into Arthurian romance, glas was taken to mean green. Another fact which reinforces this point is that green is a color associated with Irish fairies, a matter discussed further in chapter three.

Bercilak openly discusses Morgain le Fay, another important character, after Gawain has suffered the ax

strokes. Morgain, the green man says, devised the whole Beheading Game/Temptation scheme and she was the old woman at Bercilak's castle. Morgain never speaks in the poem, and from her actions, she does not seem to be particularly malevolent, but Bercilak tells Gawain that she is responsible for the entire action which she instigated in the hope of hurting Guinivere.

An analogue to the character of Morgain le Fay can be found in the Táin Bó Cuailnge. This character, the war goddess the Morrigan or the Morrighu, falls in love with Cuchulainn and approaches him while he defends the marches of Ulster. Since this happens during the time of his single combats, Cuchulainn spurns her because he is busy with warfare. While Cuchulainn fights the following day, the Morrigan changes her shape three times to hinder the solar hero. She becomes in turn an eel (these contests took place in the water), a she-wolf, and a red heifer. He injures her each time, and she bears the marks of those wounds until Cuchulainn will bless her, which he vows never to do. The Morrigan appears to Cuchulainn a fourth time in the shape of an old woman; unaware of her identity, he blesses her three times, healing each of her injuries.

Loomis has noticed the similarity between the name of the Irish war goddess the Morrigan and Morgain le Fay of Arthurian romance. He points out that in GGK the Green

Knight refers to "Morgne þe goddes" (l. 2452).¹⁶ No other proof is needed to connect Morgain le Fay with the Morrigain of the Ulster Cycle.

Morgain devises a test to challenge Gawain's mettle. Bercilak says that the woman who tempted Gawain was his own wife, and Mother Carson notes that Bercilak was probably Morgain's husband Urien.¹⁷ If so, then Morgain is both the old woman and Bercilak's lady, so the Green Knight is not telling the complete truth. The Green Knight's trustworthiness is suspect; after all, since he is in league with Morgain, it should be expected that he might lie. Besides, if Bercilak's wife is Morgain, there is yet another parallel, for Morgain herself tempts Gawain with her favors, just as the Morrigain offers her love to Cuchulainn and then presents him with three trials when she changes her shape.

A careful study of the similarities between the Red Branch and GK reveals that the poem, as well as all Arthurian romance, owes more than simple narrative outline to the Irish tales. The plot similarities between "The Champions' Bargain" and the Temptation episode are striking, but close attention to the similarities of the characters is important, too. A comparison of plots and characters often explains why the characters in GK behave as they do. The Green Knight's actions take on a clearer meaning when compared with Curoi's motivation and behavior. Morgain's

curious game becomes more easily understandable when it is accepted as the logical evolution of the Morrigain's actions towards Cuchulainn from the Táin to GGK. A comparison of the Ulster Cycle and GGK provides deeper insight into the poem.

ENDNOTES

¹Roger S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), pp. 3-5.

²Alice Buchanan, "The Irish Framework of Sir Gawain and The Green Knight," PMLA, 47 (1932), 326.

³George Brandon Saul, Traditional Irish Literature and Its Backgrounds: A Brief Introduction (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1970), p. 19.

⁴Augusta Gregory, Cuchulain of Murthemne, 3rd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 35.

⁵Loomis, p. 51ff; L. Winifred Faraday, The Cattle Raid of Cuailnge (London: David Nutt, 1904), pp. 62-63; Buchanan, p. 319.

⁶Saul, pp. 41-42.

⁷Saul, p. 38.

⁸Saul, p. 33.

⁹Sir Thomas Malory, Le Morte D'Arthur, ed. Thomas Wright (London: John Russell Smith, 1865), p. 147.

¹⁰Mother Angela Carson, "Morgain la Fée as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 23 (1962), 8.

¹¹Loomis, p. 50.

¹²Buchanan, p. 316.

¹³Loomis, p. 16.

¹⁴Loomis, pp. 55-56.

¹⁵Buchanan, p. 327.

¹⁶Loomis, p. 192.

¹⁷Carson, p. 8.

CHAPTER III

THE IRISH TRADITION, THE MEDIEVAL WELSH TALES, AND THE ENGLISH ROMANCE

Tracing the analogues of GGK from the Red Branch necessarily includes a study of the Mabinogion and another Welsh tale, roughly contemporary with these stories, Culhwch and Olwen. Roger S. Loomis and J. R. R. Tolkien, as I noted in the introduction, believe the story line of GGK moved from Welsh to French and back across the channel into English. Since no French source is extant, that part of GGK's development is not easily studied except by conjecture; however, much source study is available in the Welsh tales. In order to discover the link that the Welsh branch of the Celtic tradition offers Arthurian romance, and thus GGK, these stories must be studied in relation both to the Red Branch and to the medieval English poem.

The Mabinogion is often considered the source of the Temptation episode in GGK,¹ although it does contain more than just that parallel. Strong evidence exists that there is material for the Temptation in the older Ulster Cycle as well, but the sequences in the Mabinogion are no less valuable than those of the ultimate source. The

Temptation episodes which appear in the Welsh tales provide the link between the Irish tradition and GGK.

The first branch of the Mabinogion--Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed--is the Temptation analogue closest to GGK. Pwyll, in this tale, gets separated from his companions during a hunt. As he follows his hounds through the woods, the young chieftain meets and inadvertently insults a man dressed in grey, mounted on a grey horse, who turns out to be Arawn, king of the Other World, Annwn. In order to make reparation for the offense, Pwyll agrees to change shapes with Arawn; the bargain includes that the disguised Pwyll kill Arawn's enemy Hafgan one year from the day of the exchange. Part and parcel of the bargain is, of course, that Pwyll and Arawn each rule the other's kingdom for the year, and since Arawn is married, the fairy king offers the young chieftan the use of his wife, who is completely unaware of her husband's absence.

During the year, however, Pwyll refrains from taking advantage of the lady's favors, even though she is the most beautiful woman he has ever seen. In fact, he is more than a little cold to her, for each night when they retire, Pwyll turns his back on her, refusing to say as much as a word once they are alone.

On the day of the confrontation, Pwyll follows Arawn's orders explicitly, killing Hafgan. He then returns to the

appointed place to change shapes with the fairy king. Once back in Annwfn, Arawn discovers from his wife that the disguised Pwyll never enjoyed the fairy woman, and he is greatly pleased, thus cementing a friendship of much value to Pwyll and later to his son Pryderi.

In this tale, Pwyll parallels not only Cuchulainn but also Gawain. The Welsh chieftain travels to a strange castle and stays there while the lord is away, just as the Irish and English heroes do. In each case, the castle is a great distance away (in Pwyll's case all the way to the Other World), and these castles belong to benevolent hosts who are unable to be present. In order for the tests to be operational in these stories, the hosts must be elsewhere. Curoi and Arawn are absent for the duration of their guests' stays, while Bercilak's hunts keep him from his castle until nightfall for three consecutive days. Bercilak returns each evening to exchange his spoils with Gawain, and he remains in the castle until the following morning.

Unlike Cuchulainn, both Pwyll and Gawain meet their "testers" before their trials; Pwyll comes upon Arawn prior to his journey to the Other World, and Gawain meets Bercilak at the latter's castle before he undergoes the temptation or beheading episodes. Pwyll is the only one of the three who must actually go through shapeshifting,

but all three have experiences with magicians: Curoi conjures grey creatures, Arawn changes his and Pwyll's forms, and Bercilak appears in two different states, the friendly host and the green adversary. For all three magic is a way of life: Arawn is king of the fairy Other World; Curoi, it has been suggested, is a god or demi-god, a form of the Celtic deity Lug;² and Bercilak, although not a magician himself, is obviously a fée creature.

Cuchulainn and Gawain both strike off an opponent's head in decapitation contests, while Pwyll faces Hafgan, Arawn's enemy, giving him a single, mortal blow. Hafgan begs Pwyll to finish him quickly, but the Other World king has warned the young chieftain against that, for Hafgan can always recover from multiple blows, while a single stroke is fatal. This combat between Pwyll and Hafgan takes place in the middle of a ford, thus echoing Cuchulainn's single combat in or near a stream when he protected the marches of Ulster. The contest in the first book of the Mabinogion, then, parallels both the Irish saga and the English poem.

Arawn openly offers his wife to Pwyll knowing that she will not resist him. Gawain, too, is offered his host's wife, except that he believes that his host does not know that his lady is disposing herself quite so warmly to his visitor. In both cases, however, the guests decline the

offers of the ladies' affections. Gawain, by doing so, passes Bercilak's test:

"Now know I wel þy cosses, and þy costes als,
And þe wowyng of my wyf: I wroȝt hit myseluen.
I sende hir to asay þe, and sothly me þynkkeȝ
On þe fautlest freke þat euer on fote ȝede;
As perle bi þe quite pese is of prys more,
So is Gawayn, in god fayth, bi oþer gay knyȝteȝ."
(ll. 2360-65)

["Now I know well your kisses, and your manners also,
And the wooing of my wife: I wrought it myself.
I sent her to assay thee, and truly I think (you are)
One of the most faultless men that ever went on foot;
A pearl beside a white pea is more precious,
So is Gawain, in good faith, by other gay knights."]

Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed, like GKG, has in it a disguised host, but in the Welsh tale the disguised man is Pwyll himself, the one to be tested. Pwyll is certainly not tested in the sense that Gawain is, since Arawn fully expects his guest to enjoy his wife. Bercilak hides his double identity as the lord of the manor and as the Green Knight in order to test the young knight's bravery. Gawain's honesty, his chastity, and his fidelity to one who has given him shelter are all tested through the temptation of the chate-laine and the exchange of winnings.

The exchange between Gawain and Bercilak is an integral part of the poem. Without it, Gawain's test lacks depth. The bargain adds strength and depth to the poem not only because it completes a neatly executed design in offering a parallel to the exchange of blows between Gawain and the Green Knight, but also because it develops the

young knight as more than a one-dimensional character; for it is through Gawain's finishing his part of the contest that the poet shows the young man to be brave, trustworthy, and honorable. The trade between the host and the guest is also important in Pwyll, although more as a superficial plot device than a symbol of the main character's personal development; however, without taking each other's identity, Pwyll and Arawn would never have been able to complete their bargain. Even though the exchanges in the two stories create such vastly different effects, they are still part of one of the important parallels between the first branch of the Mabinogion and GGK.

The Green Knight challenges Gawain to find him a year from the day of their first meeting in order that the bargain may be fulfilled. So, too, in Pwyll the young chieftain must meet with a supernatural being a year from the day that he and Arawn change shapes, and in "The Tragic Death of Curoi," Cuchulainn searches for a year before he discovers Curoi's dún. Gawain and Pwyll lead relatively blissful lives until their appointed days; the Englishman feasts at Arthur's court and then at Bercilak's castle until the day before the confrontation, and Pwyll feasts and sports at Arawn's court until he must face Hafgan. Both men are mortals who oppose supernatural

beings in contest: Hafgan is a fairy king and the Green Knight is a man transformed by Morgain le Fay's magic.

When Gawain's trial is over, there is no apparent hostility between him and the Green Knight:

"Þerfore I eþe þe, hapel, to come to þy naunt,
 Make myry in my hous; my meny þe louies,
 And I wol þe as wel, wyþe, bi my faythe,
 As any gome vnder God for þy grete traupe."
 And he nikked hym naye, he nolde bi no wayes.
 Þay acolen and kyssen and kennen ayþer oþer
 To þe prynce of paradise, and parten ryȝt þere on
 coolde.

(ll. 2467-74)

["Therefore I ask thee, nobleman, to come to your
 aunt,
 Make merry in my house; my household loves you,
 And I wish you as well, man, by my faith,
 As any man under God for your great truth."
 And he said no to him, he would not by no way.
 They embraced and kissed and commended each other
 To the Prince of Paradise, and parted right there on
 the cold ground.]

Although Gawain is invited back to Bercilak's castle, he is more anxious to return to Camelot. Likewise, no animosity exists between Arawn and Pwyll when they meet at their bargain's close either. Arawn has ruled Dyfed wisely in Pwyll's stead. Any reason for hostility between the two vanishes when each discovers the other has held his lands well, and Arawn ever after takes special care of Pwyll for the courtesy shown him in the matter of his wife.

The fourth branch of the Mabinogion, Math, Son of Mathonwy, also bears many similarities to GGK and the Irish sagas. Lleu Llaw Gyffes is unable to marry a human

woman because of a curse which his mother has laid upon him; his uncle, Gwydion, creates for him a woman out of flowers, Blodueudd. One day while Llew is away, a young chieftain rides near the castle during a hunt. In keeping with the rules of Welsh hospitality, Blodueudd invites him into the castle. The chieftain, Gronw Pebyr, and the flower woman fall in love and spend three nights together. Unable to bear permanent separation, the lovers decide that Blodueudd will discover the secret of how Llew may be killed, and, once armed with that knowledge, Gronw will dispense with his rival. The plan is carried out, and Llew, upon being struck the killing blow, changes into a wounded eagle and flies away.

Like Gronw and Blodueudd, Cuchulainn and Blanaid plot against the flower maiden's husband Curoi. Both Curoi and Llew cannot be killed except under peculiar circumstances with specially made weapons. Although in GGK no lovers plot against the husband, there are parallels between the English poem and the Welsh story. Just as in GGK, a young man comes upon an unfamiliar castle while he is on an errand, albeit Gronw's business is hardly as pressing or as serious as Gawain's. Llew is away visiting Math and will not return for several days, similar to Bercilak's absence when he is hunting. Instead of facing three temptation tests from Llew's wife, Gronw and Blodueudd

spend three nights together, and each day as Gronw tries to leave, Blodueudd persuades him to remain. Gronw, then, fails his tests, because he betrays his host by sleeping with Blodueudd, and he agrees to kill Lleu for her.

One year later, Gronw attacks Lleu, and it is an unfair contest since Lleu does not know Gronw has been preparing to kill him; hence, the lover emerges as the victor, at least for a while, but ultimately his uncle's magic saves Lleu, and the wronged husband returns to take vengeance on the lovers. Also, Gronw, like Gawain, faces a supernatural foe, for Lleu can only be killed when he is poised over a river with one foot on a goat's back, just as Curoi the shapeshifter could only be killed while in a similar position.

The last passage in Math ties up the loose ends of the two lovers' attempt to murder Lleu. It also contains similar material to the exchange of blows in GGK. The Welsh tale does not have decapitation, but there is an exchange. After Lleu has flown away in the eagle's shape, Gwydion (unaware of the lovers' plot) worries at his nephew's disappearance. The magician finds Lleu, who is very sick, and ministers to him; it takes nearly a year for Lleu to regain his health. Gwydion then turns the faithless Blodueudd into an owl. Gronw, realizing that Lleu and his kinsman mean business, sends a message asking

what retribution he can make for his offense: land, gold, or silver. Lleu sends this answer:

"No, I confess to God," he said. "Here is the least I will accept from him: let him go to the place I was when I was hit by the spear and me be where he was and let me cast a spear at him. This is the least I will accept."³

Gronw asks whether any of his retainers or comrades will accept the blow in his place, but they decline, just as Arthur's knights hesitate to take the Green Knight's challenge. Since Gronw is a dishonorable man, there is no Gawain to take his place in the exchange of blows. Lleu casts the spear at Gronw Pebyr and kills him.

Both GGK and Math involve a guest who must take a blow from his "host" after having given one to the man a year previously. Between Gawain's stroke and the return blow, it is exactly a year, and it takes almost a year for Gwydion to heal Lleu. The time spent in locating Lleu and in setting up the return blow accounts for the remainder of the year. Unlike in GGK and "The Champions' Bargain," the receiver of the blow is killed. Gawain is more like Cuchulainn than Gronw since he is worthy of living through the ordeal, although Cuchulainn is still the one who comes out of his trial the best, because Gawain does fail in accepting the lady's kisses and her lace.

Although Gronw has behaved in an unseemly manner, his punishment seems not so much for the crime as for failing to execute it properly. A similar situation happens in

Culhwch and Olwen when Culhwch's father, the widower Cilydd, consults his advisors about choosing a second wife. They suggest the wife of King Doged; however, since Doged is still alive, there are complications. Nevertheless, Cilydd and his men attack King Doged's fortress, kill him, and steal his widow. Apparently such an action was not considered unseemly behavior if one managed to succeed, because Cilydd is never punished for the way in which he got his second wife.

In addition to these two branches of the Mabinogion, another tale which is similar to both the Ulster Cycle and GGK is Culhwch and Olwen, a work that is generally accepted as the earliest story concerning Arthur and his court.⁴ Basically, the tale relates how Culhwch won Olwen, a giant's beautiful daughter, with the help of his kinsman Arthur, the dominant character in this tale. Patrick K. Ford maintains that the story is not about the two lovers at all, but Arthur. The boy Culhwch and the giant's daughter are flat characters.⁵ The Arthur who appears in this story is indeed the Arthur of the later romances, although his men are not yet called knights, and his famous round table is yet to come into existence. He is wise, brave, generous, and fair, but not quite as refined as he later becomes.

Culhwch's mother dies shortly after the boy is born, and his father remarries seven years later. When the new

queen suggests the boy take one of her daughters as a wife, he replies that he is as yet too young for marriage. The stepmother curses the boy, saying he may have for his wife only Olwen, daughter of Ysbaddaden the Chief-Giant. His father learns of this and sends Culhwch to Arthur, instructing the boy to ask for Olwen as a gift from his kinsman. After a year of searching, Arthur's men discover Ysbaddaden's castle, and when Culhwch approaches the giant about Olwen, Ysbaddaden stalls the boy. The Chief-Giant tells Culhwch and his companions to leave and return the next day for his answer. As they leave, Ysbaddaden hurls a poison spear at them, but Bedwyr (later in Arthurian romance, Sir Bedivere)⁶ catches the spear and casts it back to the giant, injuring him. Culhwch and his companions return and get the same treatment for two more days, each time injuring Ysbaddaden with his own spears. Finally the giant sets Culhwch a long list of seemingly impossible tasks; if the boy completes them all, he may have the girl. Ysbaddaden is unwilling to part with Olwen, because he must die when she takes a husband.

Arthur and his men see that each task is completed, and they acquire the necessary proofs. Culhwch returns then to Ysbaddaden's castle to collect his rewards, Olwen and her father's lands. Before he takes possession,

disguised as a bachlach, a giant herdsman. In accordance with their bargain, Cuchulainn strikes off the bachlach's head; then he must fulfill the rest of the pact, just as does Gawain. Culhwch, too, makes an agreement with a giant, but his bargain is completed by the time he kills Ysbaddaden. Like Gawain and his Irish counterpart, Culhwch decapitates his adversary; however, since the Welshman's foe is not a magician or a fairy creature, as are Curoi and the Green Knight, Ysbaddaden does not come back to life. Culhwch, then, is able to destroy his enemy.

Of all the characters in the Welsh tales who are like those in GGK, the most noticeably similar is surely Arthur in Culhwch and Olwen, since this is the earliest known tale about the famous king. Unlike Arthur, Gawain has counterparts in the first and fourth branches of the Mabinogion, as well as in the Arthurian tale. In the first branch, the similarities between Gawain and Pwyll are primarily plot-related. There are few character traits that Gawain and Pwyll share; however, the Welshman is tested by the charms of a beautiful lady, and he does resist temptation even better than Gawain does, for while the young knight accepts six kisses from Bercilak's lady, Pwyll never so much as touches Arawn's wife. Gawain and Pwyll each readily face a fearsome enemy under strange

circumstances, and both men are firm of resolve, exhibiting great strength and courage.

In Math, Son of Mathonwy the character Lleu, who has associations with both Curoi and Cuchulainn from Irish legend, is Gawain's counterpart. Lleu is the Welsh parallel of Curoi in "The Violent Death of Curoi," in that he, too, loses his beautiful wife to her lover and apparently loses his life. But Lleu also has characteristics of Curoi's rival, the solar hero Cuchulainn. Although this might seem highly unlikely, actually it is to be expected that some characters should have attributes of both Curoi and Cuchulainn. In his Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance, Roger S. Loomis provides an excellent explanation of why this sort of thing happens. Curoi and Cuchulainn, Loomis says, are in reality the same god:

In the first place, both Curoi and Cuchulainn seem identified with Lug. We have the explicit statement that Cuchulainn was the rebirth of his father Lug. Likewise, Curoi is generally called the son of Daire, who in a certain ancient tradition was equated with Lugaid, and in a certain story the sons of Daire are all named Lugaid, a name which MacNeill declares to be practically a variant of Lug. It would seem, therefore, as if one had a right to call Curoi, Lug son of Lug, just as Cuchulainn is also Lug son of Lug.⁸

Loomis grants that Cuchulainn is a "boy hero,"⁹ while Curoi is always described as unusually large. This is simply further proof that Cuchulainn and Curoi are the same person, but in different stages of development. Loomis notes

that in the Táin Cuchulainn is "referred to . . . frequently by diminutives like Cucan or Cucucan, which would mean 'little Hound' or 'Little Cu.'"¹⁰ This being the case, Loomis asserts, these shortened versions of Cuchulainn's name mean "Little Curoi."¹¹ Thus, if Cuchulainn and Curoi are really two facets of the same character in Irish tradition, it is not at all unlikely, but in fact necessary, that Lleu be connected with both. In his early life, Lleu exhibits many of the same characteristics as Cuchulainn, but when he is older, Lleu seems more like Curoi mac Daire.

Lleu bears little if any resemblance to Gawain in the poem, but I think it is beneficial to show the parallels between Lleu and the Gawain of the Arthurian tradition. Lleu's unfaithful wife Blodueudd is a character who appears in the Ulster Cycle as well as in later Arthurian romance. Blodueudd means "flower face,"¹² and Blanað, Curoi's unfaithful wife, means "little flower."¹³ These two women play the same role in their respective traditions, and their names mean practically the same thing. Gawain, in some of the medieval romances has a sweetheart named Floree,¹⁴ an apparent vestige of the Celtic flower woman who links Arthur's nephew firmly to Lleu.

In Culhwch and Olwen it would seem necessary that Culhwch be the same character as Gawain. He, like Gawain, is Arthur's nephew; he battles a giant, and a woman is

involved in the action. On these things alone, perhaps a case could be made for Culhwch's being Gawain; certainly their predicaments are related. However, when Culhwch recites a catalogue of warriors to Arthur at his court, several of the characters seem more closely related to Gawain than Culhwch is. Loomis believes the character Gwrfan Gwallt Afwyn is based on Cuchulainn and that Gawain is based on Gwrfan. According to Loomis, in Welsh tradition there are both a Gwrfan and a Gwrnach, whose names mean "little Gwri" and "big Gwri," respectively, corresponding to a big and little Curoi.¹⁵ The name Gwrfan Gwallt Afwyn means "Little Gwri with hair like reins."¹⁶ It should be noted that Pwyll's son Pryderi is taken from his mother Rhiannon the night he is born. Teyrnnon, a Welsh lord, finds the baby and raises him as his own son, giving him the name Gwri. Patrick K. Ford suggests that there is more than a passing similarity between events around the births of Gwri (Pryderi) and Cuchulainn, in that both are taken from their natural mothers soon after their births and newborn twin foals are found near each baby.¹⁷

Two other names also appear in the catalogue which seem to be related to Gawain and Cuchulainn. Gwarae Gwallt Eurin, or Gwarae Golden Hair,¹⁸ possesses one of Cuchulainn's attributes, red hair. The Irish, and probably

the Welsh, treasured red gold. Since they were sun worshippers, this color was very important to them.

The character Gwalchmai mab Gwyar was long thought to be the counterpart of Cuchulainn and therefore Gawain, but Loomis totally discounts this theory.¹⁹ In Culhwch and Olwen, however, it is related that Arthur

summoned Gwalchmai map Gwyar for he never returned home without his mission accomplished; he was the best on foot and the best on horse (he was Arthur's nephew--his sister's son--and his cousin).²⁰

Thus, various attributes of Cuchulainn appear in several Welsh warriors. Gwrfan, whose name is much like Gawain, is little Gwri, or little Curoi; he has long hair like Cuchulainn's; and Gwalchmai is the best Welsh horseman and foot warrior, as Cuchulainn is the foremost fighter in Ireland. Both Gwalchmai and Gawain are Arthur's nephews by sisters, just as Cuchulainn is Conchobar's nephew by Deichtine.

Another character in the Welsh tradition who preserves the Irish hero solarity is Cei, who later becomes Sir Kay the Seneschal in Arthurian legend. Cei, the tale explains, has many gifts, among them that of heat:

When it would be raining hardest, whatever he held in his hand would be dry for a fist-length all around because of the greatness of his passion; and when his companions were coldest he would be fuel to kindle their fire.²¹

Cei's passion is reminiscent of Cuchulainn's residual battle heat which melted snow and boiled water.

The Morrighain of Irish literature, the female battle divinity, who seems to have some connection with Morgain le Fay, appears with some other interesting folk in Culhwch's catalogue of Arthur's knights. According to Irish tradition, the Morrighain turned into a raven on the battlefield and feasted on the flesh of those slain. In his catalogue, Culhwch mentions a warrior Morfran, whose name means "great raven." Culhwch recites, "No one wounded him at the battle of Camlann, because of his ugliness. Everyone thought he was an attendant demon; he had hair on him like a stag."²²

At the time of the composition of the Red Branch, women were warriors: Queen Medb fights at Ailill's side, and the woman Scathach is the best fighter from whom to learn the art of warfare. Later, however, during the seventh century, women were discouraged from participating in battle;²³ therefore, when Culhwch and Olwen was being written down (c. 1000-1100), it made no sense to the Welsh for Morfran to be a female; a warrior had to be a man. Thus, the war goddess the Morrighain became the male warrior Morfran. In Culhwch's catalogue, though, the Welshman includes among a group of women one named Morfudd, the daughter of Urien Rheged.²⁴ This is a particularly interesting association because one of the later Morgain's husbands was named Urien. Obviously,

in the Welsh tradition Morgain had a longstanding association with Urien.

Also listed in Culhwch's catalogue are Cnchwr son of Nes, Cubert son of Daere, Fergos son of Roch, Lluber Beuthach, and Corfil Berfach,²⁵ who are obviously Conchobar mac Ness, Curoi mac Daire, Fergus mac Rogh, Laegaire Búadach, and Conall Cernach.

The dear lady on whose account Gawain endures his ordeal, Guinevere, is also mentioned in Culhwch and Olwen. The Welsh Arthur swears "by my weapons and my wife Gwenhwyvar" that whatever his nephew asks of him shall be given. Loomis notes that the Welsh Gwenhwyvar, which later became Guinevere, came from the Irish name Finnabair, Queen Medb's daughter.²⁶ In Irish the b was almost always pronounced as a y, which makes the similarity more convincing, along with the fact that as Irish and Welsh developed into separate languages what became f in Irish became g in Welsh, and both Finn and Gwynn meant white.²⁷

Bercilak, like Arthur and Gawain, also has counterparts in Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed; Math, Son of Mathonwy; and Culhwch and Olwen. J. R. Hulbert calls Bercilak a "shapeshifter,"²⁸ and in using this term for Gawain's host, he has established Bercilak's connection not only with Curoi, but also with Arawn, the notorious shapeshifter from the

first branch of the Mabinogion. Bercilak changes completely from a huge, brilliant green knight to a large "beuer-hwed" [beaver-hued] lord with whom Gawain spends the feast days. As a fairy king, Arawn is able to change his form into anything he chooses. In Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed, he has need of shapeshifting only once, into Pwyll's form and back again. Nevertheless, both Arawn and Bercilak are counterparts to the original shapeshifter, Curoi mac Daire.

Like Arawn, Bercilak puts his wife at his guest's disposal. Bercilak's lady remains chaste through Gawain's virtue; Pwyll's honor and dignity keep Arawn's wife safe while her husband is away.

Several shapeshifters appear in the fourth branch of the Mabinogion. Math himself is able to alter the forms of others, although he never changes his own shape. Math's nephew Gwydion is able to change his own appearance as well as Lleu's, who does no shapeshifting of his own, but when Blodueudd and her lover try to kill him, Lleu turns into an eagle and flies away. Lleu is very similar to Bercilak in that his wife tempts a guest into becoming her lover (and in this tale succeeds).

Ysbaddaden, the Chief-Giant in Culhwch and Olwen, is like Bercilak in the form of the Green Knight. Ysbaddaden's castle is so remote from the rest of Welsh

civilization that no one knows where it is. It takes Arthur's men a little over a year to discover its location, just as Gawain travels a considerable time before he happens on Bercilak's castle. Culhwch and Arthur's men stop near Ysbaddaden's fortress at the home of a herdsman, Custenin, who directs them to their goal, just as Bercilak's squire directs Gawain toward the Green Chapel. Once the young Welshman and his companions reach the giant's castle, Ysbaddaden throws three spears at the group, paralleling the three strokes which Gawain receives from the Green Knight.

Ysbaddaden is very large and ferocious; the Green Knight is also unusually large, according to the poet's description. The Knight's awesomeness is attested by the fact that none of Arthur's men, the flower of knight-hood, accepts the challenge issued by the uninvited guest. Gawain and Culhwch each come to the castles to fulfill a pledge of some sort, Gawain to keep his part of the bargain with the green man, and Culhwch in accordance with his stepmother's curse. Both young warriors achieve their ends, but Bercilak fares much better through his affair than Ysbaddaden does, for the Chief-Giant loses his life.

These Welsh tales, Pwyll, Lord of Dyfed; Math, Son of Mathonwy; and Culhwch and Olwen, are all stories in which the Celtic heritage is evident. The roots of these Welsh

tales lie in Celtic mythology; either they developed from the Irish, or more likely, both derived from a common ancestor. Regardless, the Welsh tradition which so broadly and faithfully echoes the Red Branch later became Arthurian romance. GGK is closely allied with Celtic literature; incidents and plots in the English poem are abundantly available in Irish and Welsh traditions, as are the models for the characters of Arthur, Gawain, Bercilak, and Bercilak's lady. By the time of Culhwch and Olwen, a work beyond question contemporary with the Mabinogion, the names that were later to become familiar to much of Europe and to inspire such literary figures as Tennyson and Steinbeck, had become unmistakably connected with the characters of Arthurian romance: Arthur, Gwŷnhyvar, Cei, Bedwyr, and Gwrfan.

ENDNOTES

¹Charles Moorman, The Pearl-Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 99.

²Roger S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), p. 55.

³Patrick K. Ford, The Mabinogi and Other Medieval Welsh Tales (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1977), pp. 98-99.

⁴Ford, p. 119.

⁵Ford, p. 108.

⁶Jeffrey Gantz, The Mabinogion (New York: Penguin Books, Ltd., 1977), p. 134.

⁷Ford, p. 147.

⁸Loomis, p. 55.

⁹Loomis, p. 56.

¹⁰Loomis, p. 57.

¹¹Loomis, p. 57.

¹²Ford, p. 108.

¹³Loomis, p. 15.

¹⁴Loomis, p. 228.

¹⁵Loomis, p. 62.

¹⁶Loomis, p. 62.

¹⁷Ford, p. 8.

¹⁸Ford, p. 130.

¹⁹Loomis, pp. 62-63.

²⁰Ford, p. 132.

²¹Ford, p. 132.

²²Ford, p. 127.

²³Loomis, p. 41.

²⁴Ford, p. 131.

²⁵Ford, p. 140.

²⁶Loomis, p. 36.

²⁷Loomis, p. 36.

²⁸J. R. Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt,"
Modern Philology, 8 (1915), 457.

CHAPTER IV

THE OTHER WORLD AND MISCELLANEOUS CELTIC ELEMENTS

The Other World, the land of the fairy or sidhe, has a long history among the Celtic peoples; Ireland is well-known for her leprechauns, kelpies, and other fairy folk. The belief in the sidhe prevailed not only in Ireland, but also in Wales, Scotland, and parts of England. GGK is permeated with things Celtic.

The Other World and its trappings are very important to the poem. The magic practiced by Curoi in the Red Branch and by almost all of the characters in the Mabino-gion indicates just how familiar supernatural beings and forces were to the Celtic audiences. As these literatures developed into Arthurian romance, it was imperative and wholly natural that the Other World would be included in those stories.

The sidhe originate in ancient Celtic mythology, as John Spiers notes:

The goddesses--spring, flower, earth, or moon goddesses, or fountain, tree, lake, or sea spirits--have become courtly ladies, queens, or kings' daughters in the romances; but they also have often retained their Other World character as fairy beings.¹

If this is true of goddesses, it is safe to assume it is also true of the gods. Loomis believes Curoi to be the

Celtic storm god. Logically, Arawn in the Mabinogion and Bercilak in GGK are the fairy counterparts of this older storm deity. Gawain, who evolved from the sun divinity that Cuchulainn represents, is not a sidhe, but a knight possessed of phenomenal nobility, honor, and strength as the sun ascends.

The land of the sidhe is not a heaven; human beings can travel to the Other World and back again, not always the worse for the experience. It is a country of this earth, but remote from the normally accessible civilized areas, peopled by beautiful, magical, human-like creatures who take a passing interest in the affairs of men.² Often, for reasons known only to the sidhe, a fairy desires that a specific human being come to him in the Other World. A command to appear in Fairyland is issued, and the mortal obeys either of his own free will or because he is tricked into it. This sort of occurrence, an Other World journey, is a common motif in fairy literature³ and has a characteristic pattern. First, of course, comes the summons. Then the journey begins, almost always quite long,⁴ during which the traveller has various encounters with dangerous creatures.⁵ Once the mortal arrives in the Other World, he is struck by the incredible beauty and the lavishness of its decoration and offerings.⁶ As Mother Angela Carson points out, one can hardly fail to notice the similarities between

Gawain's excursion to the Green Chapel and the Other World journey common to fairy literature.⁷

Morgain summons Gawain to the Other World, the Green Chapel, for her purposes: to test the mettle of Arthur's best knight and to frighten Guinevere. After the young knight has endured the prescribed ax strokes, Bercilak tells Gawain exactly why the whole episode has come about:

"Þurȝ myȝt of Morgne la Faye, þat in my hous lenges,
And koyntyse of clergie, bi craftes wel lerned--
Þe maystrés of Merlyn mony ho hatȝ taken;
(ll. 2246-48)

["Through the might of Morgain le Fay, that in my
house lingers,
And cunning of magic, by skills well learned--
The arts of Merlin many she has taken;]

.
Ho wayned me vpon þis wyse to your wynne halle
For to assay þe surquidré, ȝif hit soth were
Þat rennes of þe grete renoun of þe Rounde Table;
Ho wayned me þis wonder your wytteȝ to reue,
For to haf greued Gaynour and gart hir to dyȝe
With glopnyng of þat ilke gome þat gostlych speked
With his hede in his honde before þe hyȝe table."
(ll. 2456-62)

[She sent me in this manner to your pleasant hall
For to test your pride, if it is true
What is current of great renown of the Round Table;
She sent me as this wonder to take away your wits,
For to have grieved Guinevere and made her to die
With horror of that same man that ghostly spoke
With his head in his hand at the high table.]"

The Green Chapel is the Other World, and Morgain is a fairy. Her name indicates that she is a sidhe; she is almost always called Morgain le Fay, fée or fay meaning fairy.⁸ In GGK Bercilak calls her "Morgne þe goddes,"

this unquestionably linking her with Celtic tradition. In the same manner that the goddesses often become the fairies of romance, so then has Morgain become a sidhe. To Camelot she sends her messenger, the Green Knight, with his awesome challenge. After the messenger is beheaded, Gawain must answer Morgain's summons, even though he is unaware that the incident is a ploy to bring him to the fairy woman. Even had he discovered the ruse after beheading the Green Knight, Gawain would have been honor-bound to fulfill his part of the bargain.

If Morgain is a fairy creature, then the Green Chapel and Bercilak's castle must be part of the Other World. Gawain's journey to the Green Chapel is, indeed, perilous. The young knight sets out for his destination with no notion of how to get there. Every person he asks has never heard of the chapel or its inhabitant. It is winter, and the difficult trek is made even more demanding by the bitter cold that affects the creatures nearby as much as it does Gawain:

With roȝe raged mosse rayled aywhere
 With mony bryddeȝ vnblyþe vpon bare twyges,
 Þat pitosly þer piped for pyne of þe colde.
 (ll. 745-47)

[With rough ragged moss arrayed everywhere
 With many birds unhappy upon bare twigs,
 That piteously piped for pain of the cold.]

In addition to braving the elements during the long trek, the hardy knight must sleep on the bare ground from the

day after All Saints' Day, November 2, "tyl Krystmasse euen," nearly two months' time. The journey is not simply spent in fighting the cold and searching for the Green Knight, for the poet says;

At vche warpe oþer water þer þe wyȝe passed
 He fonde a foo hym before, bot ferly hit were,
 And þat so foule and so felle þat feȝt hym byhode.
 So many meruayl bi mount þer þe mon fyndeȝ,
 Hit were to tore for to telle of þe tenþe dole.
 (ll. 715-19)

[At each shore or water where the man passed
 He found a foe before him, but a marvel it was
 And that so foul and fierce that it behooved him to
 fight.
 So many marvels there in the mountains the man finds,
 It is too difficult to tell of the tenth part.]

Gawain must battle all manner of enemies from "wormeȝ" [dragons] to "wodwos" [wildmen] to "etayneȝ" [giants]. Thus, his passage from Camelot to the Green Chapel is a difficult journey to the Other World.

Gawain suddenly comes upon Bercilak's castle; it appears from nowhere as if by magic. On a hill with trees all around, the castle stands, "þe comlokest þat euer knyȝt aȝte" (l. 767) [the comeliest that ever a knight owned]. It is surrounded by a moat in the middle of a large, beautiful "park," and, the poet reports, "hit schemered and schon þurȝ þe schyre okeȝ" (l. 772) [it shimmered and shone through the white oaks]. Gawain decides to ask for lodging at this castle, the only one he has come across since beginning his journey.

showed clear white, / Napkin and salt cellar and silver spoons]. The fairy host's apparent wealth (for like all fairy fabrications, the trappings are not real) is a standard part of the Other World journey, and Bercilak's wealth is displayed in the table with its lovely cloth, the silver, and the much treasured salt cellar. The dishes offered to Gawain also indicate that his host is no ordinary man, for the servants present several stews and many kinds of fish, "Summe sopen, summe in sewe sauered with spyces" (l. 892) [Some boiled, some in stew savored with spices]. The number of different dishes certainly suggests to Gawain that Bercilak is unusual, as do the precious metals and costly materials, but perhaps one of the most telling details to the errant knight is the appearance of the salt cellar and spices on the table, for only the wealthiest people with the right connections could afford those luxuries in a time when spices traveled the long trade routes from their distant, exotic sources.¹¹

Another point which shows that Gawain has reached the Other World lies in the loveliness of the people he meets at Bercilak's castle; the fairies are always the most beautiful people that a visitor has ever seen.¹² Indeed, Bercilak is tall and handsome, "and of hygh eldee" [in the prime of life]. He is strong with a face "felle . . . as þe fyre" [fierce as a fire], and his manner is

extremely pleasing. The lady of the castle is a perfect match for her husband:

Ho wat3 þe fayrest in felle, of flesche and of lyre,
And of compas and colour and costes, of alle oper,
And wener þen Wenore, as þe wy3e þo3t;
(ll. 943-45)

[She was the fairest in skin, of flesh and or face,
And of proportion and coloring and manners, of all
others,
And fairer than Guinevere, so the man thought;]

Lovelier even than Arthur's queen, the fairy wife behaves as one schooled in the courtly arts.

That a castle should be part of the Other World is not unusual, for in both the Irish and Welsh tales there are castles in the land of the sidhe. Blanað is often viewed as a fairy wife who summoned Cuchulainn to Curoi's castle, which was located in the Other World,¹³ and Carson notes that Arawn's castle is a typical representation of Fairyland.¹⁴ There too everything is incredibly beautiful and lavishly provided. Just as Bercilak's lady is all but perfect, so Pwyll finds Arawn's wife an unutterably lovely woman.

However, the sojourn at Bercilak's castle is only part of Gawain's stay in the Other World. On New Year's the young knight must forsake his host's pleasant castle and company to find the Green Chapel and its formidable occupant. Once Gawain's guide departs and the knight reconnoiters his surroundings, he discovers the area to

be most inhospitable. But he sees no chapel, only "on a launde, a lawe" [in a field, a mound], and of this place J. R. Hulbert says, "it is in fact a fairy mound,"¹⁵ one of the most likely places fairies are to inhabit. Since there is no structure, it might seem strange that the area is called the Green Chapel, but "the use of the word 'chapel' of a place not consecrated at all but enchanted and the scene of strange happenings, is current in the French romances."¹⁶ The Green Chapel is not necessarily a place holy to God. It is, according to the tradition of romance, often sacred to the sidhe. The terms "holy" and "sacred" are proper here; fairies are vestigial Celtic deities.

Even Bercilak's name illuminates the function and meaning of the Green Chapel and the Other-Worldly castle. Gawain asks his opponent his true identity after the ordeal, and he is answered that Bercilak de Hautdesert is his real name. Peter Barry writes that "'desert' [is] a Celtic word for 'the dwelling place of a hermit,'"¹⁷ thus rendering the Green Knight's real name "Bercilak of the High Hermitage."¹⁸ Carrying through the religious image initiated by the use of "chapel" in reference to the fairy mound, Bercilak is a hermit of the sidhe, most especially, if not exclusively, of Morgain le Fay, just as a hermit was a religious man serving the Christian God apart from the mainstream of civilization.

In addition to the Other World journey there are other features in the poem directly related to the sidhe, among them the use of the color green as it appears in the greenness of the knight and his horse, the green lace given to Gawain, and the Green Chapel "with erbe³ ouergrown" [with herbs overgrown], in the dead of winter. In the Irish and Welsh tales grey and not green is used in connection with the two shapeshifters Curoi and Arawn. As a fairy color, grey still prevails in some areas; among Shetlanders who have retained belief in the sidhe one of the euphemisms given to certain types of fairies is "the Grey Neighbors,"¹⁹ and a report from Glen Aldyn, Scotland, indicates that fairies seen there are "greyish all over."²⁰ The confusion between the grey creatures of the Celtic tales and GGK has been logically and sufficiently explained. Green took the place of grey in the poem, and, indeed, in most fairy tradition also. There has been a tendency to misread the meaning of the color of the knight in the poem, largely due to ignorance about the importance of Celtic tradition in GGK, as Charles Moorman notes that "the greenness of the Green Knight has been explained in terms of both its possible connections with early vegetation myth and with its Celtic origins."²¹ Because of Bercilak's close affiliations with the sidhe, his greenness is as much an indication of his Other-Worldly nature as of his connection with vegetation myth.

In An Encyclopedia of Fairies, Katharine Briggs says of the fairies and their appearance:

Green is generally acknowledged to be the fairy colour, particularly in Celtic countries, and for this reason is so unlucky that many Scots-women refuse to wear green. Red runs very close, and in Ireland the small trooping fairies, the Daoine sidhe and the Shefro, wear green coats and red caps. . . . ²²

Hulbert also notes that green and red are the colors most often connected with the Other World inhabitants and that often in fairy literature there "are instances of green as color of clothing, complexion, and horses. . . . " ²³

As the Green Knight, Bercilak is described as being green from head to toe; the poet notes that he is "oueral enker grene" [overall very green]. There is a detailed discussion of the disguised Bercilak's appearance from his green hair to his fur-lined "mantile" down to his feet, including his horse's gear: the "sadel," "steropes," "arsoun," and "apel sturtes," all of which are of "pat ilke." The horse is "grene" as well as "gret and pikke," just as the Green Knight is heralded by the poet as being "Half etayn" [Half giant]. Both the man and his beast are immaculately and richly displayed with "golde," "silk," "metail anamayld," and bells of "brende golde."

When the unusual intruder asks whose hall he has entered, the poet notes that the people present at the feast are certain he is a creature of "fantoum and fayry³e"

[illusion and magic], a supernatural being sent by the fairies for some evil intent. His greenness indicates to the revellers that he is indeed a sidhe. After the challenge is issued to the court, the Green Knight views Arthur's men with his "rede yȝen," apparently the only part of the formidable visitor that is not green. Red, it has been noted, is also a fairy color, often being worn by many fairies along with green. Thus, not only do the Green Knight's red eyes provide an arresting contrast to his brilliant hue, as the bachlach's yellow eyes do in "The Champions' Bargain," but they further emphasize his affiliation with the sidhe.

As the Green Knight rides into Arthur's hall, he holds in one hand a green ax whose head is "an elnȝarde" [an all-yard, forty-five inches] long and in the other

honde he hade a holyn bobbe,
 That is grattest in greene when greueȝ ar bare,
 (ll. 206-07)

[hand he had a holly branch,
 That which is greatest in green when groves are bare.]

The ax carries associations with Curoi because the shape-shifter brings such a weapon to Conchobar's court when he tests Cuchulainn, and Loomis notes that the ax has long had connections with storm gods as the thunder weapon, thus cementing the Green Knight's relationship to the storm divinity Curoi.²⁴ The holly branch that the disguised Bercilak carries is no less ominous than the ax.

Although some scholars, like William Goldhurst, prefer to see the greenery as connected with fertility and vegetation myths,²⁵ it seems more appropriate to discuss the branch in the light of what it indicates as holly as well as its function as another green item. Carson points out that the place of holly "might have lent a note of irony to the Green Knight's protestations that he had no wish to harm the court, for it is a superstition in Wales that if one brings holly into a friend's house he brings death."²⁶ In addition, green, partly because of its associations with the sidhe, is "the Celtic colour of death."²⁷ Thus, the holly in GCK must be a death symbol, as it would be in Celtic tradition.

Arthur's subjects, then, recognize the Green Knight as a death threat to them, for he is immense, green, and carries a holly branch. No matter how soothing his speech or how apparently veracious his protestations of not being motivated by malice, his intent is obvious to anyone who beholds him; his aspect carries the message that his tongue belies. Among the fair courtiers of Arthur's court, the Green Knight is as unusual as the green holly in wintertime when the other plants are withered and dead.

The use of holly in connection with death and war appears twice in the Ulster Cycle, both times with Cuchulainn. While the solar hero is holding off Medb and

Aillill's army during the Ulstermen's pangs, he comes upon a charioteer cutting wood for a chariot shaft. Cuchulainn offers to do the trimming, "Then, under the other's [the charioteer's] eyes, he stripped the holly-shafts through his clutched fists, paring them clean, knot and bark."²⁸ Later in the conflict with the army, Cuchulainn agrees to meet Nadcranntial in single combat. Against the boy hero, Medb's champion brings "nine spears of holly."²⁹ Thus, two of Cuchulainn's enemies use holly as part of their battle gear; in the same manner, the Green Knight carries a holly branch as part of his "armor." As previously shown, the Welsh associate the plant with death; it must have had a similar meaning for the Irish since it appears in the Táin in that connection.

Another feature of GKG found in Celtic and fairy traditions is the green lace. Once the final rebuff is made to Bercilak's lady, she urges Gawain to accept a love token from her. He firmly but gallantly refuses until she gives him her own girdle made of green silk, decorated with embroidery and gold. At first the knight is reluctant to take even this as a token, but he accepts it when she tells him:

"For quat gome so is gorde with þis grene lace,
While he hit hade hemely halched aboute,
Þer is no hapel vnder heuen tohewe hym þat myȝt,
For he myȝt not be slayn for slyȝt vpon erþe."
(ll. 1851-54)

["For whosoever man is girt with this green lace,
While he has it neatly looped about him,
There is no man under heaven who might cut him down,
For he might not be slain by any means on earth."]

This girdle has been seen by some scholars as connected with the "primal forces of nature,"³⁰ and a "splendid adornment of courtly life,"³¹ but more appropriately it indicates the realm of the fairy and an earlier Irish feature.

In almost all other stories of Other World journeys the summoned mortal is given a gift with remarkable properties, one providing the new owner with wealth and protection.³² George J. Englehardt says that Gawain chooses a talisman, the green lace, to protect his life,³³ and the green girdle, because of its color, is a fairy gift. Like all such gifts, the lace holds the promise of immunity to death. Bercilak's lady chooses her words carefully when she persuades Gawain to keep her gift; no one, she says, could "tohewe" the wearer, and it is precisely hewing which worries the young knight. Certainly her well-selected words along with the magical properties credited to the lace persuade Gawain to accept her love token.

When the Green Knight appears at Camelot, among his many green garments, the poet lists a "belt." This belt, Loomis says, is the same green lace which Bercilak's lady

gives to Gawain, "for some magic influence enabled him [the Green Knight] to come through the beheading alive."³⁴

Not only is the girdle an integral part of the poem as fairy literature, but it is also essential in that in the Irish tradition there are magical belts with preservative properties. Curoi has such a girdle in an early Irish tale, and Loomis rightly maintains "that the precious girdle which Curoi possesses in the Irish saga must be the original of the magic girdle" in GGK.³⁵ When Curoi fights wearing the belt, he is not killed, Loomis notes, but when he does not have it, he cannot withstand Cuchulainn's blows. The solar hero himself possess a battle belt: "Arrows and spears would bound back from [his] belt as if from stone or horn."³⁶ The battle belt, then, seems to have been a convention of Irish saga which ultimately influenced GGK.

Because the fairy gift is a feature of sidhe lore, especially in the Other World journey, it is appropriate that Gawain receive a gift from his fairy "mistress." Considering the Celtic sagas, it is not surprising, then, that Gawain's gift is a belt, a valuable token imbued with Other-Worldly power.

The battle belt is an item of great supernatural strength which protects its wearer from the onslaughts of druids, shapeshifters, and warriors. The green lace

these scholars are correct. There is no pentangle per se in the Irish tales, but Cuchulainn does possess a shield that is similar to Gawain's. The solar hero's shield has on it five gold wheels on a red background.³⁹ "The wheel," Loomis points out, "was a familiar solar symbol and Cuchulainn has long been recognized as possessing solar traits."⁴⁰ Since GGK is "saturated with Irish tradition,"⁴¹ the five golden wheels are the probable origin of Gawain's pentangle.⁴² As a symbol, the five-pointed star is as ancient as the wheel, but when a device was being devised for Gawain's shield, it made more sense to the poet, perhaps, to use a symbol reminiscent of the original but more familiar. Cuchulainn's emblem reflects his solarity, in much the same the way the cross has symbolized Christ to generations of Christians. Golden wheels do appear on shields in medieval romance, and Loomis has connected those wheels with the Ulster Cycle and Cuchulainn's device.⁴³

Besides the similarities between the emblems, the colors of the shields are identical: the golden design on a red background. Both red and gold are constantly associated with the solar hero in his clothing and his hair. The evidence seems very strong that Gawain's five-pointed golden star on the gules field must have originated with Cuchulainn's golden wheels against the crimson background.

Englehardt maintains that "the symbol of the pentangle is . . . indispensable to the understanding of the poem."⁴⁴

If this is true, it is absolutely necessary to understand the pentangle's function and its origins. Its background is obviously Celtic in the framework of GGK, but its function is not, I think, to symbolize "the complete man"⁴⁵ or to hold any primary "Christian significance."⁴⁶ The device is often associated with magic,⁴⁷ and it is supposed to give one protection from the Other World.⁴⁸ "It is not," Spiers says, "accidental that Sir Gawain's emblem is the pentangle, an ancient life symbol."⁴⁹ The design on Gawain's shield is there to protect him from the powers of the sidhe,⁵⁰ but the young knight himself must be unaware of the pentangle's properties or else reluctant to trust himself entirely to the device, for he still eagerly accepts the green lace when he discovers its powers. However, the design is an ancient protective emblem, regardless of whether Gawain is conscious of that fact. "Heraldry is said to have originated," Hulbert notes, "from the use of a device on a shield to protect the warrior from the evil eye."⁵¹ The employment of Gawain's pentangle follows logically from such a belief.

Another item which protects a person from the sidhe is a cross, perhaps stemming from a pre-Christian notion that crossroads were safety zones in which fairies had no power, as well as from the sacredness of the cross later among Christianized Celts.⁵² Although Gawain's shield has

no cross on it, it does have another symbol painted on it which would prove an equal deterrent to the sidhe; on the reverse side is Mary's image. Thus the pentangle and the picture of Mary offer the young knight double protection against fairies.

The shield and its embellishments have their ties with Celtic tradition from which both the stories of the Red Branch and the later fairy lore developed. Like the lace, this piece of Gawain's war gear owes much to the two separate but related sources which have given it meaning and form. Understanding the origins of the shield and the pentangle is most important in order to understand their functions. The many lines spent on Gawain's shield and the appropriateness of its star to his character do not indicate the poet's desire to designate "a particular person whose device actually was the 'endless knot.'" ⁵³ It simply ties the work closer to its Celtic origins and a traditional belief in protective symbols against fairies.

The use of the Other World, the journey there, the color green, the holly, the lace, and the shield all spring from GGK's Celtic heritage. The poem is permeated with Celtic tradition. In a sense the work can be seen as an Other World journey with all the conventions of such a trip, and the greenness of the Green Knight and several other items in the poem substantiate the importance of the

sidhe in the poem. A closer inspection of the Green Knight's holly branch elucidates the real meaning behind his words when he enters Arthur's court, while the green lace and Gawain's shield with its device possess dual affiliations with the Ulster Cycle and the sidhe. Through the study of these features in GGK, it is easy to perceive that the poem owes more to the Celtic story cycles than just plots and characters. From the poem's most obvious element, the green man, to the smallest particulars of the holly branch and the intruder's eyes, the poem contains numerous Celtic details. An understanding of the origins of these elements helps the scholar make more careful and correct judgments about the poem and its possible meaning.

ENDNOTES

¹John Spiers, Medieval English Poetry; The Non-Chaucerian Tradition (New York: Macmillan Co., 1957), p. 104.

²Howard Rollin Patch, The Other World (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1950), p. 27.

³Mother Angela Carson, "Morgain la Fée as the Principle of Unity in Gawain and the Green Knight," Modern Language Quarterly, 23 (1962), 16.

⁴Patch, p. 27.

⁵Carson, p. 16.

⁶Carson, p. 16.

⁷Carson, p. 11.

⁸Thomas Keightley, The World Guide to Gnomes, Fairies, Elves, and Other Little People (1880; rpt. New York: Avenel Books, 1978), p. 4.

⁹Carson, p. 10.

¹⁰Carson, p. 13.

¹¹Madelaine Cosman, Fabulous Feasts: Medieval Cookery and Ceremony (New York: George Braziller, 1976), p. 45.

¹²Carson, p. 13.

¹³J. R. Hulbert, "Syr Gawayn and the Grene Knyȝt," Modern Philology, 13 (1915), 438.

¹⁴Carson, p. 12.

¹⁵Hulbert, p. 457.

¹⁶Hulbert, p. 706.

¹⁷Peter Barry, "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight," Explicator, 37 (1978), 30.

¹⁸Barry, p. 30.

¹⁹Katharine Briggs, An Encyclopedia of Fairies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 205.

²⁰Briggs, p. 110.

²¹Charles Moorman, The Pearl-Poet (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1968), p. 101.

²²Briggs, pp. 108-09.

²³Hulbert, pp. 456-57.

²⁴R. S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), p. 50.

²⁵William Goldhurst, "The Green and the Gold: The Major Theme in Gawain and the Green Knight," College English, 20 (1958), 61.

²⁶Carson, p. 15.

²⁷Briggs, p. 109.

²⁸Thomas Kinsella, trans., The Táin (Dublin: Dolmen Press; London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 95.

²⁹Kinsella, p. 122.

³⁰Goldhurst, p. 64.

³¹Goldhurst, p. 64.

³²Hulbert, p. 707.

³³George J. Englehardt, "The Predicament of Gawain," Modern Language Quarterly, 16 (1955), 222.

³⁴R. S. Loomis, "More Celtic Elements in Gawain and the Green Knight," Journal of English and Germanic Philology, 42 (1943), 149. Hereafter referred to as "More Celtic Elements."

³⁵Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 152.

³⁶Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 152.

³⁷Moorman, p. 101.

³⁸Hulbert, p. 730.

³⁹Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 169.

⁴⁰Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," pp. 168-69.

⁴¹Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 169.

⁴²Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 169.

⁴³Loomis, "More Celtic Elements," p. 169.

⁴⁴Englehardt, p. 218.

⁴⁵Englehardt, p. 218.

⁴⁶Spiers, p. 230.

⁴⁷Hulbert, p. 723.

⁴⁸Spiers, p. 230.

⁴⁹Spiers, p. 230.

⁵⁰Hulbert, p. 729.

⁵¹Hulbert, p. 729.

⁵²Briggs, p. 82.

⁵³Henry Littleton Savage, The Gawain-Poet: Studies in His Personality and Background (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1956), p. 158.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

The influence of the Celtic elements in GGK is particularly strong because of the sheer volume of those components in the poem; their force dominates the work. Understanding the extent to which these elements affect GGK is essential; without it, almost all interpretation becomes useless. A knowledge of the poem's Celtic backgrounds is necessary to any study of the work since Irish and Welsh traditions have left their marks on the poem's color, style, and appeal; and story lines from the Ulster Cycle, the Mabinogion, and Culhwch and Olwen have given GGK its engaging plot and its characters. The Irish and Welsh tales contain earlier if ruder forms of Gawain's and Bercilak's courtly figures, along with most of the other characters in the poem.

GGK has many similarities to the stories of the Red Branch. Previously scholars assumed that only the plot for the beheading game in GGK developed from the Irish tales. Now it is clear that not only "The Champions' Bargain" but also the Temptation motif and the ruse of the disguised guest came from the same source, the Ulster Cycle.

The similarities between the characters in GGK and those in the Irish tales are remarkable. Arthur, Gawain, Bercilak, and Morgain are easily discernible in the people in the Red Branch. Often the Irish counterparts are similar in appearance, and at other times they parallel the English roles in their relationships, social positions, and attributes. Roger S. Loomis notes that almost all the characters in the Irish stories appear somewhere in Arthurian romance.¹ Hence, Conchobar is Arthur, just as Cuchulainn is Gawain, Curoi is Bercilak, and the Morrigain is Morgain le Fay.

Most important is the similarity between Cuchulainn and Gawain. Their positions at court are basically the same; foremost warriors and kings' nephews, they share many of the same characteristics, particularly the attributes of sun gods. It is necessary to interpret Gawain and his actions through Cuchulainn, for the knight's traits and personality are the legacy of the Irish deity.

Also from the Irish tales the role of Curoi as a shapeshifter is important in understanding Bercilak as hospitable host and awesome Green Knight. Curoi is both the friendly magician who most often helps the Ulstermen and the yellow-eyed bachlach who appears at Conchobar's court to determine which Irish warrior is the bravest and most skillful. Without the benefit of Celtic tradition,

the Green Knight and his test appear to be simply Morgain le Fay's whim. Viewed in the context of the Irish saga, her collusion with Bercilak is but a continuance of the struggle between the Irish gods;² the tradition of "The Champions' Bargain" explains more satisfactorily the green man's behavior.

Morgain as a malevolent force also reflects a character from the Ulster Cycle, the Morrigan, the war goddess who not only gives Morgain her name but sets the pattern for her behavior. It is within Morgain's tradition to initiate conflict and evil.

Conchobar himself seems in many ways to be the original upon whom Arthur is patterned. The Ulsterman rules so well that his followers always surround him in battle to protect him; unfailingly and ungrudgingly a new bride's first night is his so that his noble lineage might strengthen all his kingdom. Conchobar treats all his warriors fairly, and, like Arthur, he inspires great loyalty and courage among them. Thus, the two kings are but opposite sides of the same coin.

The temptation and beheading episodes which appear in the Irish and Welsh stories also appear in GGK and concretely affirm the poem's primarily Celtic nature. In Pwyll the young chieftain of the same name is tested just as Gawain is by Bercilak's lady. Although the woman is

the most beautiful and charming lady he has ever seen, the Welshman, like Gawain, is unwilling to break the trust given him by his host. Both young men resist the temptation, unlike Gronw in Math, Son of Mathonwy. The flower woman tempts her guest, just as Blánad, another flower woman from Irish tradition, tempts Cúchulainn. In these last two cases the guests give in, and in Gronw's instance, it proves a fatal mistake. Gawain and Pwyll benefit from exercising virtue, while Gronw must forfeit his life for his duplicity.

Although "The Champions' Bargain" as it appears in GGK and the Red Branch does not show up in the Welsh tales, each of them contains elements of that story. The young man is faced with a supernatural foe, just as Gawain is in the English poem and as Cúchulainn is in "The Championship of Ulster." In the second branch of the Mabinogion there is an exchange of blows between the husband of the flower woman and her lover, as in GGK when the young knight must face the Green Knight and in "The Championship of Ulster" when Cúchulainn faces the disguised Cúroí. Culhwch in Culhwch and Olwen decapitates a giant; Gawain and the solar hero both behead giants in their respective stories. All these episodes occur in the Welsh stories, the Irish tales, and the English romance.

The character parallels between GGK and Culhwch and Olwen are often easy to spot, because this Welsh

tale is, after all, the first known tale about Arthur. Young King Arthur heads his court and is surrounded by the best warriors in Wales, many of whom will later appear in Arthurian romances. The lovely lady Guinevere also appears in this tale, although she first emerges in the Táin as Queen Medb's daughter Finnabair.

In Culhwch and Olwen, Gawain parallels Culhwch, who is a rather flat character. He is most like Gawain in his relationship to Arthur but most like Cuchulainn in that the adventure starts when he is yet a child. The greatest kinship between Culhwch and Gawain is that both are counterparts to Cuchulainn. Pwyll, on the other hand, from the first branch of the Mabinogion, parallels Gawain more closely, being a brave and prudent man who shirks no duty during his adventures. Gawain's connection with Lleu, the character from the fourth branch of the Mabinogion, is similar to his relationship to Culhwch in that it is indebted to surface details rather than to character. Nevertheless, the connection still exists, and the English knight is inescapably linked with the Celtic characters. Gawain and Cuchulainn, overall, have much in common with these three characters from the Welsh tradition, but they still share the attributes of the solar deity from the earlier Irish myth.

Bercilak, too, has counterparts in the Welsh tales. In Pwyll his shapeshifting connection with Arawn is easy to see. Both of them, through their shapeshifting, correspond to the great Irish magician Curoi. Also, Gwydion from Math shares features with Curoi and Bercilak. Although he is not specifically called a fairy, as Arawn is, he is certainly a powerful magician who can change not only his own shape but also those of other people. It is with his help that the flower maiden is created for Lleu.

In Culhwch and Olwen the giant Ysbaddaden mirrors both Curoi disguised as the bachlach and Bercilak as the Green Knight. In their disguised forms both the Irish and English supernatural beings test warriors. The trials which Ysbaddaden provides for Culhwch are much the same.

Another feature which the Welsh tales provide is Gawain's name and those of nearly all the other Arthurian characters who come from the Welsh stories. Arthur's name undergoes no change, but many of the other names do, such as Guinevere. Roger S. Loomis carefully outlines the development of Gawain's name from Cuchulainn through Gwrfan to its present English form.

The Welsh analogues to GKG are important in determining the extent of the poem's indebtedness to Celtic tradition. Clearly it derives much from the Irish tales, but what did not come from the Ulster Cycle the Welsh

stories provide. In the Mabinogion and Culhwch and Olwen the characters and the episodes of "The Champions' Bargain" and the Temptation are the link between the earlier Irish stories and one of the last Middle English romances. The Welsh tales are further removed from Celtic mythology than are those of Ulster, and GGK, although yet further removed, still preserves the elements of characters who were once gods.

The fairy literature of Ireland and Wales develops from cultural myth, the gods and goddesses later becoming fairy folk. GGK, a work with much Celtic background, necessarily contains a great deal of material concerning the sidhe. There is an Other World journey in which Gawain travels the long and perilous route to the Green Chapel, fighting men and beasts along the way in accordance with the conventions of such a journey. Bercilak's castle and the chapel each indicate they are part of Fairyland. The castle is as beautiful as any fairy dwelling ever described. Its trappings are the finest; the people Gawain meets are among the loveliest he has ever seen. Bercilak treats the young knight most hospitably, providing his guest with restful quarters, excellent refreshments, and pleasant companionship. Just as the land of the sidhe is full of bright light, peopled with lovely creatures, and embellished with the finest materials, so too is the castle where Gawain stays.

The Green Chapel is no less part of the Other World for being different from Bercilak's castle. Fairies have long been thought to haunt burial mounds, and the chapel is no structure at all, but a mound. The Chapel and its immediate area are covered with growing plants during the dead of winter, making it an unnatural place, a green place of fairies. Furthermore, the Green Knight's name links him and the mound to the sidhe, for Bercilak of the High Hermitage is part of a complex religious image initiated in the reference to the area as a chapel. The mound is consecrated to the fairies who were once deities, and Bercilak is a hermit in the service of Morgain the goddess.

The color green is not chosen arbitrarily, for although in the Red Branch and Pwyll the magical creatures are grey, green is the fairy color as well as the Celtic color of death. Green dominates the poem; it is the color of the knight, his horse and armor, the holly branch, the Chapel, and the girdle. When the knight enters Arthur's court, his appearance bespeaks two things to the Christmas revellers: the intruder has fairy affiliations and he is a harbinger of death. Even though the Green Knight says he wishes no one harm, none of the revellers believes him because of his color. The visitor carries a large green ax and a holly branch, both of which are tokens of his animosity against Arthur's court. The ax is obviously a

threat once the giant discloses the rules of his challenge, and the holly, a death symbol, further dampens any enthusiasm for the unusual bargain.

The Green Knight is well aware of his visage and its effects on Arthur's court. He knows that his sudden appearance in the hall and the proffered game carry a subtle meaning to those attending Arthur's feast. Both his size and the effect of his color on the revellers give the fairy knight the upper hand in the situation. Arthur's men are challenged, but the unfair advantage which they face prevents them from behaving more nobly than they do. Arthur's pride will not allow the awesome green guest to leave bearing the tale of the Round Table's unwillingness to take up his challenge. Even though he expects dire consequences from the confrontation, Arthur accepts. Gawain's own pride and sense of justice will not allow him to watch his king contest with a fairy, so the young knight takes his lord's place. Gawain, too, knows that the giant knight is a creature sent by the sidhe and that his prospects of winning are not good. When he decapitates the visitor, the head reminds him of their bargain; the veiled message of the Green Knight's appearance becomes a clear and grisly reality for all those present. The giant green man, his ax, and the holly branch signify a meeting with the sidhe and the possibility of death for one of Arthur's knights.

Another fairy feature in GGK is the green girdle which Bercilak's lady gives to Gawain. Its function is twofold: it is both a fairy gift and a vestige of the battle belt which Cuchulainn wears. Fairy mistresses who summon their lovers always give a present which provides wealth and protection or power to its owner. In the role of the fairy mistress, Bercilak's lady has a gift for her lover, although Gawain is not a lover in the sense that he neglects either his obligation to his religion or to his host. He is a perfectly courtly lover who maintains his chastity as well as his duty to the lord of the manor, while not offending the lady. Since Gawain does not wish to receive a love token from Bercilak's wife, it takes all her powers to persuade the young knight to accept her gift. Finally she must resort to playing on Gawain's fear of death.

Since the green girdle protects its owner from all attack, it bears a definite resemblance to the battle belts of the Irish tales. Cuchulainn and Cu Roi both have belts which deflect enemy spears and arrows. The Green Knight also wears a green girdle at Arthur's court, probably the same lace given later to Gawain. Doubtless the Irish battle belt is the ultimate source for the girdle in GGK, and as a green gift, the lace is another connection with the fairy world.

Another element in GGK which reveals the poem's Celtic tradition which the poet carefully details is Gawain's shield when the young knight arms himself. The front is red with a gold pentangle, and in its upper area is the image of Mary. This blazon resembles Cuchulainn's own shield, and yet it keeps the heraldry familiar to a medieval audience. The GGK-poet made the change from circles to pentangle, itself an ancient symbol long connected with magic; it is a likely protection against fairies. In addition, Gawain's bright blazon reinforces his ties with Cuchulainn, providing still more proof that he is an expression of the solar hero's powerful character.

Overall GGK is completely saturated with Celtic features. From its most obvious to its seemingly insignificant elements, the poem is filled with episodes, characters, and details of the Irish and Welsh stories. That the work is comprehensively Celtic is interesting in view of the theories of the poem's genesis as a French tale.

Alice Buchanan maintains that GGK "is closer in many ways to the original Celtic form than is the earliest"³ retelling of the story. It seems odd that a tale would become more and more like its ultimate source the more it was told, when the general trend is for stories to become less like the original with each successive telling. The answer must lie in the direct source of GGK being close

to the original stories. Although the Welsh tales are closer to Gawain in time and geography than the Irish, the poem itself is much closer to the Ulster Cycle.

However the Gawain-poet came across his source materials, he takes the story and tells it once again in the West Midland alliterative line, giving the world a medieval romance which, unlike its contemporaries, is more than a loosely organized string of adventures. GGK tells again the myths of the ancient Celts, refurbishing their solar hero and polishing the rough-natured divinities and their associates. It is through the knowledge of these earliest analogues to the poem that a correct and enlightening interpretation of the work may be formed. Without this information all attempts to understand GGK are mere floundering. Knowing the poem's Celtic heritage helps to untangle the endless knots of which the work is made.

ENDNOTES

¹Roger S. Loomis, Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927), p. 5.

²Loomis, p. 57.

³Alice Buchanan, "The Irish Framework of Gawain and the Green Knight," PMLA, 47 (1932), 315.

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